



Crime, Safety and Firearms

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People who have guns are very attached to them. In Australia, there are a lot of guns - nobody knows exactly how many and estimates vary very widely. Realising that around 640,000 restricted and prohibited weapons were handed in during the 1996/97 buyback would put the figure in the millions. Some people have guns which they use in sport - they fire at still targets and develop skills of accuracy and precision. Some fire at live targets and shoot to kill. Others keep firearms for protection against aggressors - real or potential. Others have firearms as part of their jobs - in the military, police and in certain security situations. Some criminals have guns as their tools of trade.

Over the years, attempts by governments to restrict or regulate firearms have met with vigorous, articulate and emotional responses from those with the guns. On the one hand, there is the plain fact that when used, guns hurt, maim and kill. The response is that this occurs only when guns find their way into the "wrong hands". There is evidence that the wider the availability of guns the more likely they are to be used. As a result, there are more firearms-related deaths where gun regulation is weakest. This, however, does not apply universally, and when this argument is used, gun supporters point to Switzerland and Israel where there are among the highest rates of firearms in households, but very low rates of firearms deaths. I do not know why this is so - but it does raise issues of culture, purpose, and in particular, the culture of crime.

Frank Zimring and Gordon Hawkins wrote a book a couple of years ago entitled "Crime is Not the Problem", in which they argued that while there were very high rates of homicide in the United States, and high rates of armed robbery, overall the United States had lower rates of the many crimes that affect the majority of the population. Rates of motor vehicle theft, burglary and general theft were much higher in Sydney and London than in New York or Los Angeles. Homicide, they argue, was much higher because there were more guns in the community and the availability was very high. In other countries with very very high rates of homicide, Colombia, Croatia, Chechnya, Chile, guns are widely available - but there are a host of other dynamics.

I have a graph that shows homicide rates in four similar countries, and the same graph with firearms homicides extracted. The United States is the top line in each, but note how the gap diminishes when firearms are taken out of the equation. Part of the problem in the U.S. is that there are many guns in the hands of children - young, mostly black, children aged 12-15 have seen it as cool to carry guns and some have seen it as a necessity to carry a gun if they deal drugs or deal with unsavoury kids in other gangs. Add the impulsivity of those adolescent years to the bravado of life on the mean streets to the economic and social deprivation that characterises their lives, and that of the communities in which they live, and you have a recipe for disaster.

On the positive side, there is some excellent policy and prevention work being undertaken in Boston right now, and this has reduced gun deaths in the tough neighbourhood by dramatic amounts in recent years. So there are policy solutions, though they depend on context as much as on practice.

In 1998/99, Australia had 64 firearm homicides, the lowest number since the National Homicide Monitoring Program commenced at the Australian Institute of Criminology a decade ago. On a population basis, this works out at a rate of 3 firearm homicides per million population. In contrast, the United States, whose crime rate (other than homicide) is generally no higher than Australia's, had 9143 known firearm homicides in 1998 - on a population basis, 41 per million, 14 times the Australian rate. This is powerful evidence on the significance of firearms in homicide.

In Australia, we have a situation that is very different. Kids have never felt it necessary to take guns to school - or even to have them. Most people doing an armed robbery carry a knife or a blunt instrument rather than a gun. Less than 1 in 5 homicides involve a firearm, and less than 1 in 10 suicides involve a firearm. These are current figures. The proportion of suicides committed with a firearm is lower than it has ever been and at 8.8% is about one-third the proportion that prevailed during the 1950s, and the rate per 100,000 population of suicide deaths by firearm is also lower than it has ever been.

With regard to homicides the proportion involving a firearm is lower than for any years except 1922 and 1950, and at 18.6% is running at about half the proportion which prevailed throughout the 1960s. The rate per 100,000 population is also lower than for any period except 1950.

Nevertheless, there were still 328 people killed with a firearm in 1998, and that is 328 too many. It is important to identify a range of policy options ranging from total prohibition through making guns harder to get, or making them harder to use, or using primary health care methods to create a higher safety culture.

I want to outline some data before turning to the policy issues.

Table 1: AUSTRALIA, Firearm-Related Deaths: Number and Rate per 100 000 population, 1993 - 1998

	1993		1994		1995		1996		1997		1998	
	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate
Accident	18	0.10	20	0.11	15	0.08	30	0.17	19	0.10	21	0.11
Suicide	435	2.46	420	2.38	389	2.20	384	2.17	331	1.79	235	1.25
Homicide	64	0.36	79	0.45	67	0.38	104	0.59	79	0.43	57	0.30
Legal intervention	3	0.02	7	0.04	6	0.03	0	0.00	7	0.04	7	0.04
Unknown	6	0.03	6	0.03	3	0.02	5	0.03	2	0.01	8	0.04
Total Persons	526	2.98	532	3.01	480	2.72	523	2.96	438	2.36	328	1.75

Source: Adapted from ABS Causes of Death (several years)

- **Nationwide Levels of Firearm-Related Violence and Misuse**

Official statistics on causes of death (ABS) show that 2,827 firearm-related deaths occurred between 1993 and 1998 in Australia. Table 1 shows the numbers and rates per 100 000 population of firearm-related deaths by type of incident. Of all firearm-related deaths, 78 per cent were suicides, 16 per cent were homicides, 4 per cent were classified as accidents, 1 per cent legal interventions, and a further 1 per cent involved unknown intent. On average, there were 471 firearm-related deaths each year during the 1993-1998 period.

There are significant gender differentials in firearm-related mortality. Males accounted for over 90 per cent of all firearm suicides and accidents, and 67 per cent of victims of firearm homicides recorded during the 1993-1998 period.

Table 2: AUSTRALIA, STATES & TERRITORIES: Firearm Related Deaths, Number and Rate per 100,000 population, 1993-98

	1993		1994		1995		1996		1997		1998	
	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate
New South Wales	173	2.88	149	2.46	148	2.42	138	2.22	143	2.28	91	1.43
Victoria	111	2.48	103	2.30	99	2.19	94	2.06	100	2.17	76	1.63
Queensland	118	3.79	135	4.34	128	4.12	148	4.76	110	3.23	82	2.37
Western Australia	42	2.50	46	2.74	28	1.67	40	2.38	25	1.39	18	0.98
South Australia	41	2.81	48	3.27	43	2.93	34	2.31	29	1.96	36	2.42
Tasmania	31	6.57	35	7.40	18	3.80	50*	10.54*	19	4.01	16	3.39
ACT	4	1.34	3	1.00	4	1.34	6	1.94	3	0.97	1	0.32
Northern Territory	6	3.51	13	7.61	12	7.03	13	7.61	9	4.81	8	4.21
Australia	526	2.98	532	3.01	480	2.72	523	2.96	438	2.36	328	1.75

*Includes the victims of Port Arthur

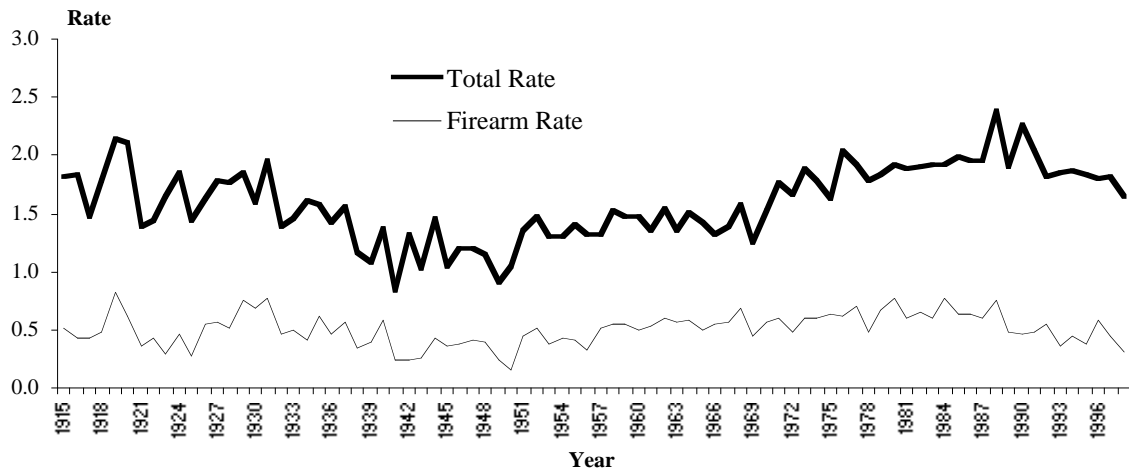
Source: Adapted from ABS Causes of Death

Table 2 shows the numbers and rates of firearms deaths per 100 000 population for Australia and each state and territory for the 6 years from 1993 to 1998. The two states with the most permissive laws prior to 1997, Tasmania and Queensland, have consistently higher rates of firearm-related deaths per 100,000 population than the national average. The Northern Territory also has a relatively high firearm-related mortality, but due to its small population (191,375 in 1998) its rate is not directly comparable to the rates for the rest of Australia.

Table 2 also shows that compared to 1997, with the exception of South Australia, there was a reduction in firearm-related mortality in 1998 in each state and territory. Nationally, there were 110 fewer firearm-related deaths in 1998, than in 1997, and 195 fewer than 1996.

- **Trends in Firearm-Related Homicide**

Figure 1: Australia, 1915 to 1998: Total Homicide and Homicide by Firearm, Rate per 100000 population



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Causes of Death*, annual, ABS, Canberra.

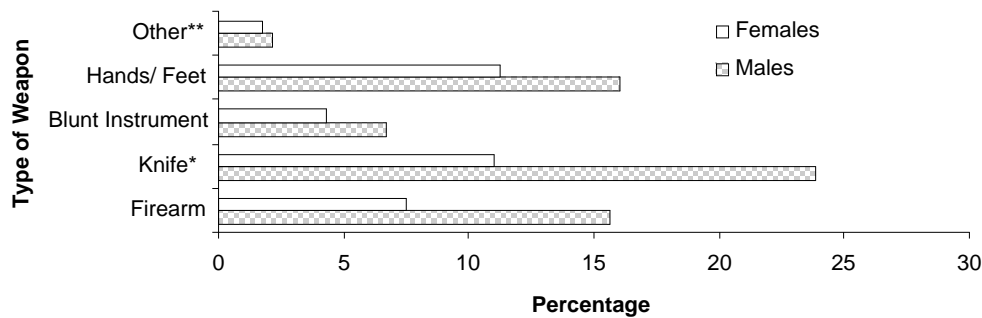
Between 1915 and 1998, the rate of firearm homicide has fluctuated from as low as 0.16 per 100,000 population in 1950 to as high as 0.78 in 1984 (see Figure 1). The most recent year recorded a firearm homicide rate of 0.30 per 100,000 population (ABS 1999). In retrospect, it appears that notwithstanding some year to year fluctuations, the rate of firearm-related homicide has been declining over the past twenty years.

Type of Weapon Used to Kill the Victim

Data contained in the AIC's National Homicide Monitoring Program, showed that between 1989 and 1999 there were 3386 homicide victims recorded in Australia. The majority of these victims (both male and female) were killed with a knife and other sharp instrument (35%) (Figure 2). This pattern has remained consistent year after year (Figure 3). A firearm was the third most common weapon used to kill, and this was preceded by the use of assaultive force (hands and/or feet).

In the most recent year – 1998-1999, 32.6 per cent (n = 111) of homicide victims in Australia were killed with a knife or some other sharp instrument, 26.7 per cent were killed by assaultive force, 18.8 per cent (n = 64) were killed with a firearm, and a further 10.3 per cent (n = 35) were killed with a blunt instrument.

Figure 2: AUSTRALIA, 1 July 1989 – 30 June 1999: Distribution of Victims by Type of Weapon and Gender (n = 3156)***



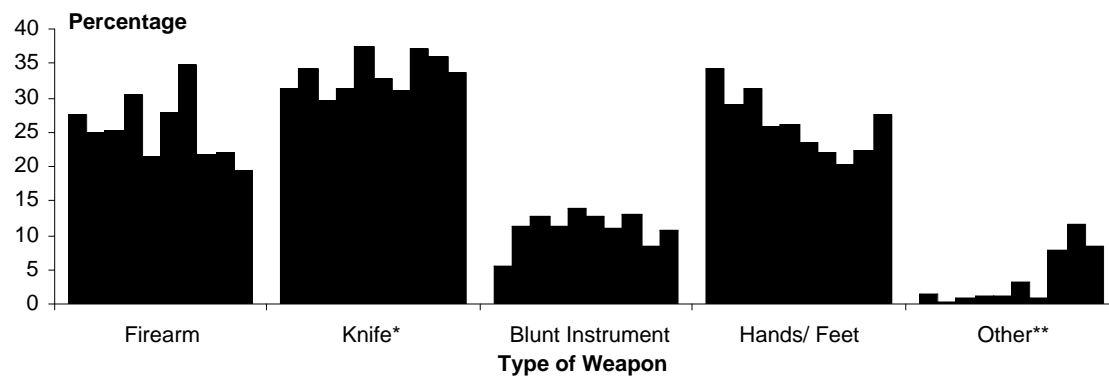
*Includes other sharp instrument.

**Other includes fire, poison (including carbon monoxide poisoning), explosives, drugs, motor vehicle, ligature, and other weapons.

***Excludes 230 victims where gender and type of weapon was recorded as unknown or not stated.

Source: National Homicide Monitoring Program, Australian Institute of Criminology

Figure 3: AUSTRALIA, 1 July 1989 – 30 June 1999: Distribution of Victims by Type of Weapon (n = 3162)***



*Includes other sharp instrument.

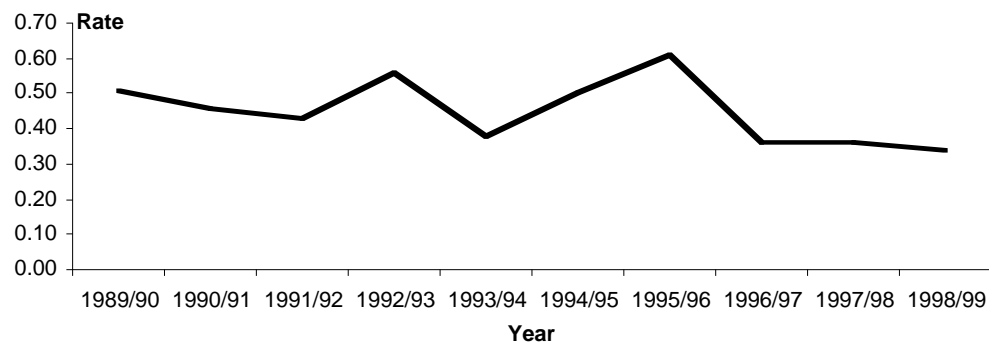
**Other includes fire, poison (including carbon monoxide poisoning), explosives, drugs, motor vehicle, ligature, and other weapons.

***Excludes 224 where type of weapon was unknown or not stated.

Source: National Homicide Monitoring Program, Australian Institute of Criminology

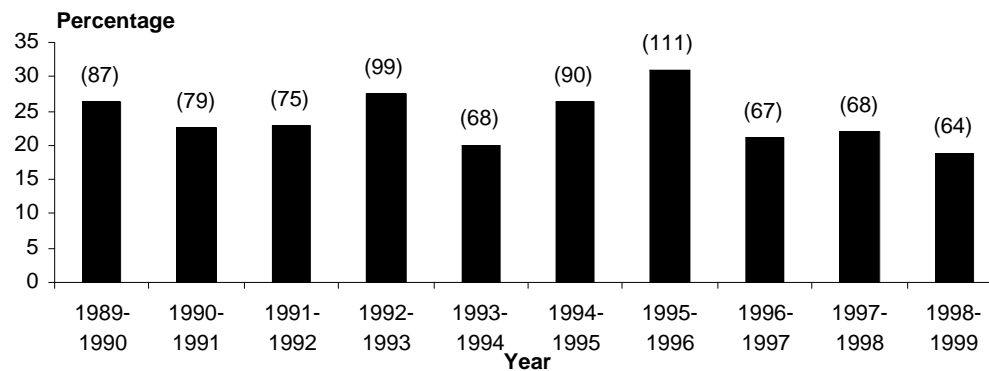
Overall, there appears to be a slight declining trend in the proportion of victims killed with a firearm (Figures 4 & 5).

Figure 4: AUSTRALIA, 1 July 1989 – 30 June 1999: Firearm Homicide Victimization Rates per 100 000 Population, per Year (n = 808)



Source: National Homicide Monitoring Program, Australian Institute of Criminology

Figure 5: AUSTRALIA, 1 July 1989 – 30 June 1999: Homicide Victims Killed by a Firearm, as a Percentage of All Homicides (n = 808)



Source: National Homicide Monitoring Program, Australian Institute of Criminology

A jurisdictional comparison reveals that there are differences across Australian jurisdictions in terms of firearm homicides as a proportion of all homicides (Table 3). Firearms are less common instruments of homicide in Western Australia, Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory. The use of firearms in homicide is higher in Tasmania (60.0% of victims were killed with a firearm, this includes the Port Arthur victims or 36.7% excluding the Port Arthur victims), Victoria (26.4%) and New South Wales (25.5%).

Table 3: AUSTRALIA, STATES & TERRITORIES, Firearm Homicide as a Percentage of Total Homicide, 1989-90 to 1998-99

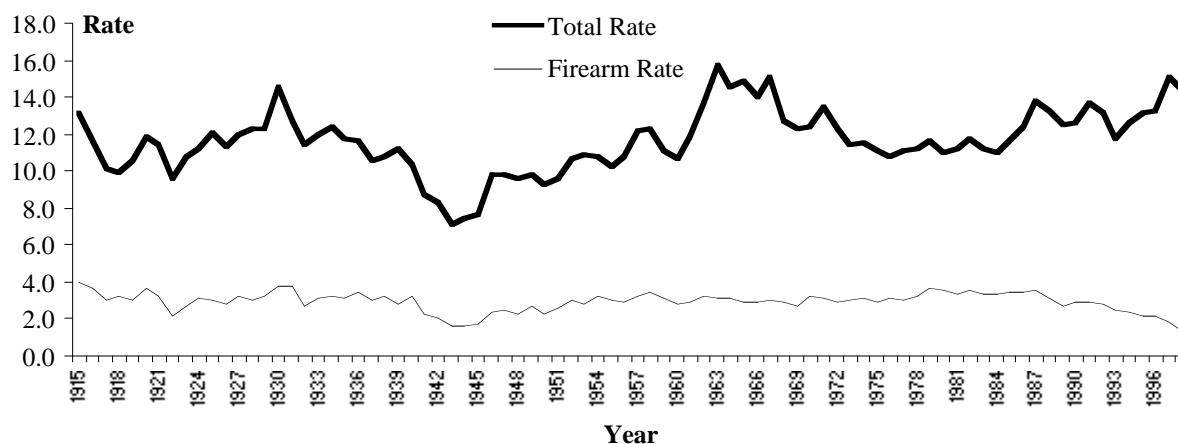
<i>State/Territory</i>	<i>Total Homicides</i>	<i>Number of Firearms Homicides</i>	<i>Firearm Homicides as a % of Total Homicides</i>
New South Wales	1165	297	25.5
Victoria	618	163	26.4
Queensland	701	154	22.0
Western Australia	334	45	13.5
South Australia	269	65	24.2
Tasmania	95	57	60.0
Australian Capital Territory	15	2	13.3
Northern Territory	188	25	13.3
Australia¹	3386	808	23.9

Source: National Homicide Monitoring Program, Australian Institute of Criminology

Licensing & Registration

Additional research undertaken at the AIC includes the examination of the licensing and registration status of firearms used in homicide. This study has found that since 1997, licensed firearms owners were not responsible for over 90 per cent of firearm-related homicides. Most (over 90%) firearms used to commit homicide were not registered and their owners not licensed. Also, the study reported that in the most recent year (1998 –1999) 42.2 per cent (27 out of 64) of the firearms used to commit homicide were handguns.

Firearm-Related Suicides

Figure 6: Total Suicide and Firearm-Related Suicide, Australia 1915 –1998, Rate per 100,000 Population

Source: ABS, *Causes of Death*, annual, ABS, Canberra.

¹ Excludes one homicide where jurisdiction was not stated.

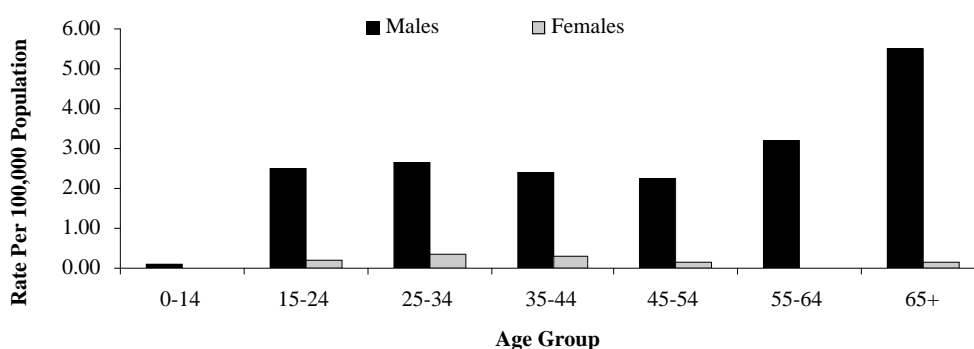
The overall suicide rate in Australia has shown yearly fluctuations, with the most dramatic changes coinciding with the two world wars and the economic depression of the 1930s (down during the wars, up during the depression). However, since the early 1990s, the total suicide rate has exhibited an increasing trend, with decreases recorded in the last two years whereas the annual firearm suicide has begun to decline (Figure 6). In terms of absolute numbers, there were 2,683 registered suicide deaths in Australia in 1998. Of those, 8.8 per cent were committed with a firearm (235). Proportionately, this is the lowest on record since 1915, indicating that firearms are being used less frequently as a means of suicide.

An examination of ABS *Causes of Death* data for 1998 reveals a number of interesting trends. In terms of rates per 100,000 residents persons aged 65 and over had the highest firearm-suicide rate in 1998. For males aged 65 years and over, the firearm-suicide rate in 1998 was 5.5 per 100,000 (Figure 7). The second highest firearm-suicide rate was for males aged between 55-64 (rate of 3.2), followed by males aged between 25-34 years (rate of 2.6).

Most research on suicide has focused predominantly on youth suicide. Although youth suicide overall is considerably quite high in comparison to other age groups, there is another age group that experiences a high suicide rate, and that group is the elderly. The number of suicides among older age groups is likely to rise, given that these groups constitute the fast-growing segment of the population (De Leo et al, 1999). For example, in 1998, 12 per cent of the Australian population was aged 65 years and over. The ABS has predicted that the average age of the Australian population will increase rapidly over the next few decades – from 34 years in 1997 to 41 years in 2021 and 45 years in 2051 (ABS 1996).

Over the past few decades, suicide rates among the middle aged and the elderly have decreased markedly (National Advisory Council on Suicide Prevention 1999). Moreover, the elderly are generally more likely to use more lethal means, such as firearms, than younger persons.

Figure 7: Australia, Firearm-Related Suicide 1998, Rate per 100,000 Population, By Gender and Age Group



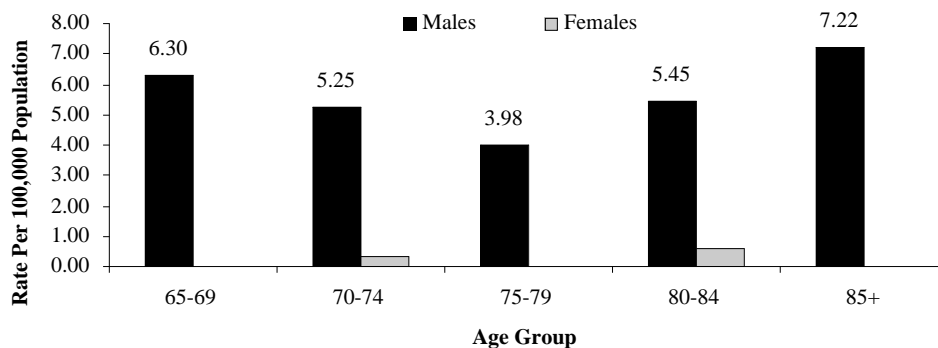
Source: Adapted from ABS *Causes of Death 1998* unit record files.

It has been argued that with persons living longer, the problems which beset the elderly, such as chronic illness, institutional care and isolation and which may have contributed to high rates of suicide in the past, have shifted into even older age categories (Hassan 1995). There may also be a decreasing stigma attached to suicide particularly among the chronically ill.

Further examination of firearm-related suicide amongst elderly males in 1998 reveals that of those who committed suicide, males aged 85 years and over had the highest firearm-suicide rate; a rate of 7.2 per 100,000 relevant population (Figure 8). “It may be at this time, that older men, for the first time in their lives, find themselves physically and economically dependent on others affected by mental and physical ill health” (Commonwealth Department of Health & Aged Care 2000, p. 23).

“The significance of higher suicide rates among the very old is that most of them obviously had a strong will to live in order to reach their age. But the economic, social, psychological, and health problems of old age become unbearable” (Hassan 1995, p. 66). Recent research suggests that suicide among the elderly is less impulsive – “suicide is often a planned and rational act” (Hassan 1996, p. 67) – methods tend to be violent, and there is less of an opportunity for rescue.

Figure 8: Australia, Firearm-Related Suicide 1998, Rate per 100,000 Population, By Gender and Age Group Over 65

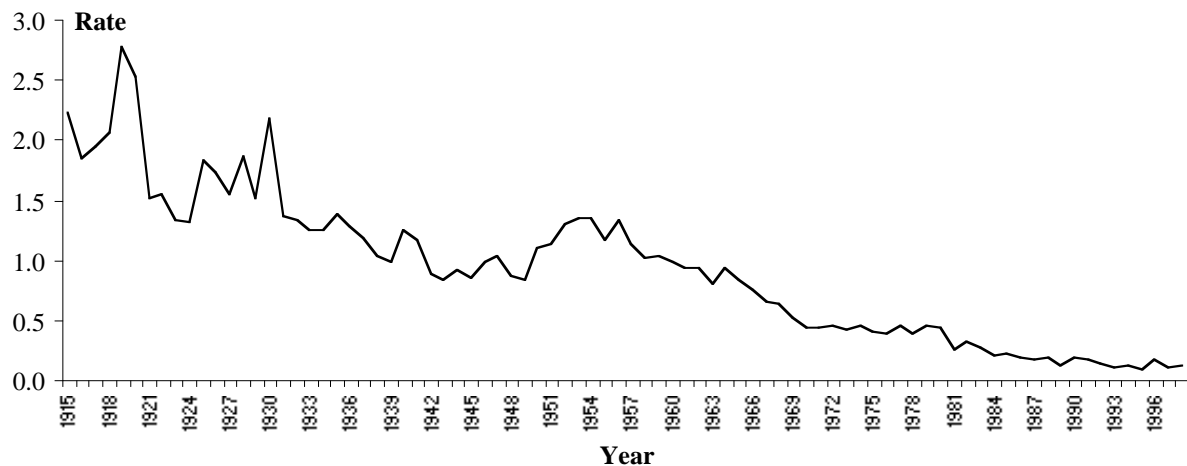


Source: Adapted from ABS *Causes of Death 1998* unit record files.

- **Firearm-Related Accidents**

The firearm-accident rate in Australia between 1915 and 1998 has exhibited a downward trend since the early 1970s (Figure 9). In Australia, the highest number of accidental firearms deaths was 144 deaths in 1919. The lowest number of accidental deaths by firearms in a given year was in 1995 where there were 15 deaths. The year 1998 recorded 21 accidental deaths by firearms.

Figure 9: Firearm-Related Accidents: Australia 1915 – 1998, Rate per 100,000 Population



Source: ABS, *Causes of Death*, annual, ABS, Canberra.

- **Forthcoming AIC Research**

The AIC has just received firearms morbidity (injuries) data from 1994/95 to 1998/99. Based on an analysis of this data, the AIC will publish a report early in the New Year examining firearms morbidity in Australia, and each of its eight states and territories. Trends and patterns in firearms injuries over the five-year period will also be discussed.

Legislation is one means by which firearms can be controlled. In the aftermath of the Port Arthur incident in April 1996, the Australasian Police Ministers' Council, comprising Federal, State and Territory Governments, reached a Nationwide Agreement on Firearms. Among other things, this agreement required the nationwide registration of all firearms and the licensing of firearms owners. Firearms applicants are required to have a "genuine reason and need for owning, possessing or using a firearm", and they are also required to:

1. Be aged 18 years and over;
2. Be a fit and proper person;
3. Be able to provide identity through a system similar to that required to open a bank account, that is, a 100 point system requiring passport or multiple types of identification; and
4. Undertake adequate safety training.

These new firearms regulations have the potential for minimising the legal acquisition of firearms by persons not suitable. Through the application procedure, persons deemed not "fit and proper" might be refused a firearms licence or their licence cancelled. Another ground for licence refusal/cancellation is "mental or physical fitness". This requires reliable evidence of a mental or physical condition which would render the applicant unsuitable for owning, possessing or using a firearm.

In addition, legislation requires that all first time licence applicants undergo and complete an accredited course in safety training for firearms. Such a course focuses on firearms law, firearms safety and competency.

Research suggests that properly trained shooters – that is, shooters trained in the safe handling and storage of firearms and thus acutely aware of their antisocial propensities – not only have lower accident rates but as a by-product may be somewhat less likely to use firearms as a first resort in crime (Harding 1981, p. 98 – 111).

Another function of the new firearms regulations is that it requires the safe storage of firearms and ammunition. Current provisions in Australia require that Licence Categories A and B firearms be stored in a locked receptacle constructed of either hard wood or steel, and that Licence Categories C, D, and H firearms be stored in a locked, steel safe (Rath and Griffith 1999).

In all our criminological work, there are two types of approaches to deal with crimes. One involves reducing the supply of motivated offenders - the other involves making the crime harder to commit. If we focus for a moment on reducing the supply of motivated offenders who might commit homicide, for example, there are a range of primary, secondary and tertiary interventions. The recent AIC Report “Homicidal Encounters” by Jenny Mouzos has a long chapter on prevention and goes through the very different strategies that might be put in place to prevent males killing males - which is a different story to intimate partner homicide which is different again to child homicide or homicide of elderly people. Many of the strategies we outline may reduce the supply of motivated offenders.

Making firearms homicide harder to commit involves a number of situational crime prevention measures.

We must always distinguish homicides committed in the course of another crime from homicides which arise out of personal relationships. We have seen a decline in both numbers and rate of firearms homicides and we have also seen a buyback of firearms in Australia. However, the decline started before the buyback, and only certain categories of firearms were involved in the buyback. When we turn to suicide, the firearms which were restricted or prohibited are not those commonly used in suicide - yet the suicide firearms numbers and rates have dropped dramatically.

In essence there are several types of situational strategies to limit gun harm

- Reducing overall supply and availability
- Restricting access
- Controlling gun use
- Technological applications

Gun control advocates focus on reducing the supply and availability of firearms - however, as we know there are already a lot of guns in the community. Two key issues in availability involve price and difficulty of obtaining a gun. Taxes and customs duties could increase the price - though the GST is a democratic tax that does not distinguish among the goods being taxed. Another issue in price is the existence of black markets in firearms in which taxes could well be evaded.

“Difficulty” gets us into the second arena, that of keeping guns out of the hands of the wrong people, in other words, limiting access. Licensing of gun owners and registration of firearms is another sphere of activity. In Australia, we now have uniform licensing and registration, and while this will not eliminate gun deaths it gives better screening processes and knowledge of who has what. We certainly know that it is possible for people to slip through the screening net and we also know that most of the problems are not created by people who are licensed to use firearms which are registered in their names. Waiting periods are also part of the access process.

A third approach is to control use of firearms and back it with legal and law enforcement sanctions. This would involve severe penalties, including prison sentences for inappropriate firearm use or possession, while a more controversial approach would be more focussed law enforcement efforts on illegal possession.

There are also a number of technological approaches that could enhance safety.

Guns can be child-proofed so that they are inoperable by children. When we realise that most children are as if not more technologically sophisticated than many adults that may not be a goer. Protections against accidental discharge and safety devices such as trigger locks can be implemented. More personalised mechanisms such as biometrics can be examined, such as an electronic sensing device that recognises a fingerprint or an iris. There are also locking systems in guns – either integral or optional. The most common uses a cable that goes through the trigger so that the gun cannot be fired without a key or combination. Other innovations include anti-tampering devices that if tampered with, the gun will fail “dead” instead of “live”.

The Colt Manufacturing Company Inc., for example has developed a radio frequency gun that has the following features:

1. The gun emits a radio signal from a chip inside its handle
2. As the weapon is drawn from the holster, a watch-like device worn by the person holding the gun receives this signal and returns a coded radio signal.
3. The weapon is enabled when it receives the return signal. All this happens in the time it takes for the officer to draw their gun.

However, even with the onset of new technology aimed at making guns “safer” the gun debate still rages. Some gun-control supporters feel that safety technology will lead to see guns as safe and cause sales to grow. Also, they have raised the issue that people may become complacent regarding the storage of firearms, and consumers may think, “My gun has a lock on it, so it’s okay to leave it loaded and lying about”. Under this scenario, guns may become a “coffee-table item”, consequently leading to an increase in danger, and not a decrease.

We know that crime is not an equal opportunity predator - we know that homicide victims are not randomly spread across the community and that those who commit suicide with a firearm are a small minority of all who suicide, and a very small part of our community.

It is unlikely that we will ever eliminate gun homicides or suicides but we can work positively to minimise them.

We need to expand our knowledge base, understand the politics of firearms advocacy and control, and most of all understand how people who are troubled and stressed can be identified early so that positive interventions can modify their troubles and stresses.