

Sporting Shooters Association of Australia

Did the 1996 firearm legislation really make a difference – just what is happening in Tasmania?

Key points from the AUDITOR-GENERAL'S SPECIAL REPORT NO. 55 GUN CONTROL IN TASMANIA (May 2005)

1. Over the ten-year period, on average firearms were used in just 1.8% of crimes. P14
2. The total number of crimes against the person rose from 2 364 in 1994 to 4 492 in 2004 (increase of 90%), while instances where a firearm was used went down from 69 to 56 (a decrease of 19%). P14
3. In absolute terms, the variation that has occurred in firearm use in crimes against the person is small. Because the incidence of these offences is so low in Tasmania it is difficult to form a conclusion based on movements in the numbers of cases. P15
4. there has been a steady increase in the number of permitted firearms each year, the acquisition process is closely controlled by Tasmania Police. P27

SSAA Executive Summary – what is happening in Tasmania

Averaging data is unsuitable as a method of analysis when there is an apparent ongoing trend over the time period under examination.

Reports from the Mental Health Services, Department of Health and Human Services, Tasmania (2000, 2002) point out that firearms have largely been replaced by carbon monoxide and hanging as the principal method of suicide.

In relation to accidental firearms injuries, the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) publication, Trends and Issues 198 notes “This decline has been driven primarily by a decline in accidental firearms injuries involving males; a decline that began prior to the implementation of firearms reforms in Australia following the Port Arthur incident.”

The data cited in Special Report No. 55 fails to provide a breakdown of thefts by source – for example, private owners versus military versus the security industry. The rate of firearm theft from private dwellings has been decreasing since 1994 (AIC Trends and Issues 230).

The trend in the firearm homicide rate since the 1980s has been downwards, reflecting the trends observed in other States. The rate of change following the NFA was not significantly different to that observed before its introduction.

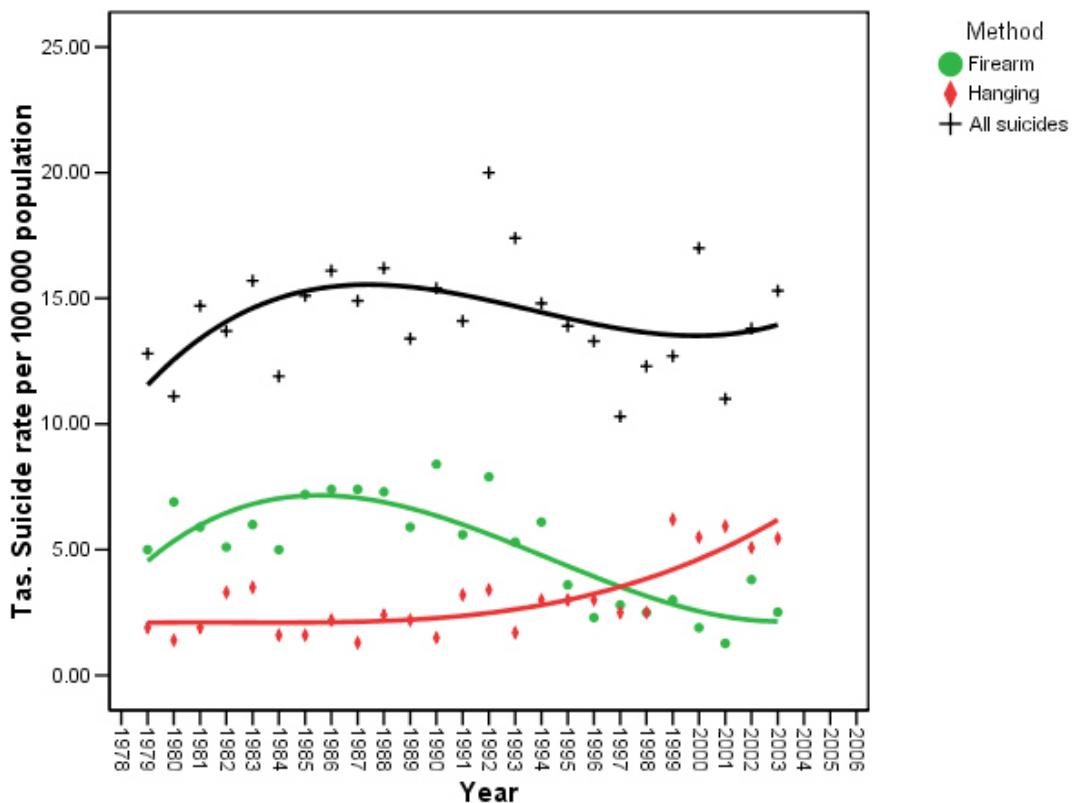
Very few firearms used to commit homicide in Australia are legally held (see AIC Trends and Issues 151 and National Homicide Monitoring Program Data).

What is happening - suicides

In addressing the first two concerns, it is necessary to examine long term trends. While averages can provide a useful tool for quantifying changes, they are generally unsuitable for assessing examples where long term, ongoing trends are apparent. If a consistent trend is present in the data, then 'grouping' data and comparing averages of those groups will produce predictable but severely constrained results.

The Auditor General's report groups data into the periods '1985-1992', '1993-1996', and '1997-2003', then compares the averages of these three groups (it is unclear what the precise statistical methods were, given the scant detail provided). Unfortunately, the apparently dramatic decreases 'caused' by each successive legislative period are simply a by-product of ongoing declines. This point applies to crime and homicide as well as suicide.

Whenever the occurrence of an event shows a decline over time (for whatever reason/s), it logically follows that the 'later' end of the trendline will be lower than the 'earlier' end of the trendline. Therefore, groups which combine 'later' years (1997-2003) will always produce lower averages than groups formed by combining 'middle' years (1993-1996), which in turn will always produce lower averages than groups composed of 'earlier' years (1985-1992).



The suggestion that firearm suicide decreased after 1996 because of the 1996 legislation is not supported by empirical data. Firearm suicide fluctuated between 1988 and 1993 but showed a slight decrease. From 1994 to 1996 there was a marked

decrease in firearm suicide that appears to have stabilised since then. Unfortunately, while firearm suicide stabilised, hanging suicides have been increasing.

Reports from the Mental Health Services, Department of Health and Human Services, Tasmania (2000, 2002) point out that firearms have largely been replaced by carbon monoxide and hanging as the principal method of suicide, and that the regional variation and age demographics concerning suicide are striking and changing. In response to the complex problem of suicide in Tasmania, and the exceptionally high number of suicides during 1992 and 1993, the Government established an interdepartmental taskforce known as the Suicide Register Steering Committee (SRSC). The activities that flowed from this Committee may well have contributed to the declines observed between 1994 and 1996.

What is happening - accidental deaths and hospitalisations

Accidental deaths

The number of accidental firearm deaths in Tasmania is so low (0 – 2 per annum) that trying to interpret ongoing trends is impossible. However, the very fact the numbers are so low and have been so low for some time is an indication that accidental deaths were not influenced by the 1996 NFA.

Hospitalisations

During the period 1994–95 to 1998–99 there has been a decline **each year** in the total number and rate of firearm-related hospital separations in Australia (AIC Trends and Issues 198). As the author of this study points out “This decline has been driven primarily by a decline in accidental firearms injuries involving males; a decline that began prior to the implementation of firearms reforms in Australia following the Port Arthur incident.” It should also be noted that a hospital record is included for each separation, but not necessarily for each patient. This means that patients who separate more than once will have more than one record.

Australia, States and Territories, 1994–95 to 1998–99—number and rate per 100,000 population of firearm-related hospital separations*

Year of separation	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	ACT	NT
1994–95	2.9 (174)	2.5 (114)	5.0 (161)	2.7 (47)	4.1 (60)	5.7 (27)	1.3 (4)	16.9 (29)
1995–96	2.5 (156)	1.8 (81)	5.4 (180)	2.1 (37)	2.7 (40)	12.3 (58)	1.3 (4)	22.6 (40)
1996–97	2.7 (167)	1.9 (88)	4.7 (159)	3.1 (55)	3.3 (49)	6.5 (31)	1.0 (3)	9.7 (18)
1997–98	2.6 (166)	1.8 (84)	4.9 (167)	2.2 (40)	3.4 (51)	3.8 (18)	1.6 (5)	7.9 (15)
1998–99	2.7 (170)	1.9 (87)	3.6 (124)	2.1 (39)	2.5 (37)	2.8 (13)	0.6 (2)	0.5 (1)

Mid-year population at 31 December was used to calculate rates (ABS 1994–2000)

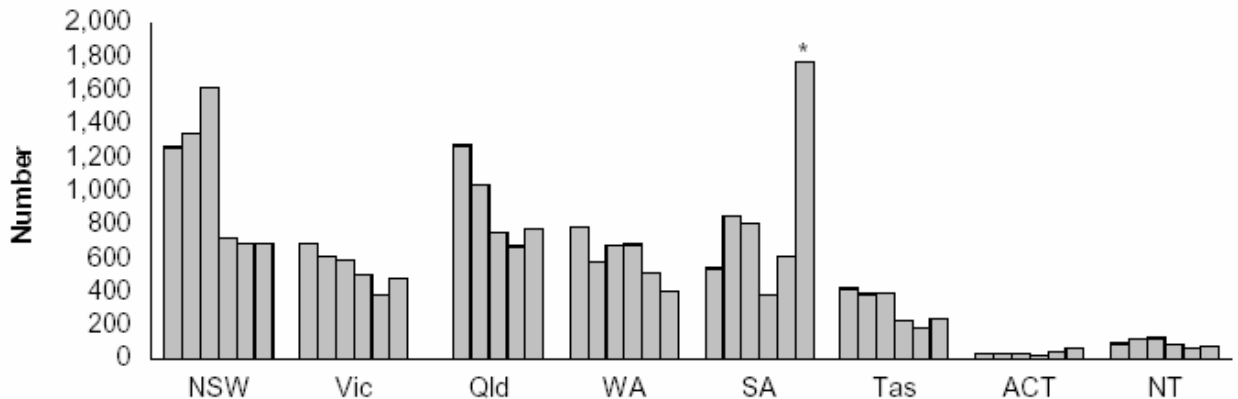
Note: Number in parenthesis

Source of table : AIC Trends and Issues 198

What is happening - thefts

It is disappointing that the Auditor General's report did not provide a breakdown of thefts by source – for example, private owners versus military versus the security industry. Understanding the changing pattern of theft is vital in assessing priority areas. It is also important to note that the figures on the proportion of firearms stolen and subsequently used in the commission of an offence are relatively low and fluctuate from study to study (AIC Trends and Issues 230).

Figure 2: Firearms stolen by jurisdiction, 1994–95 to 1999–2000



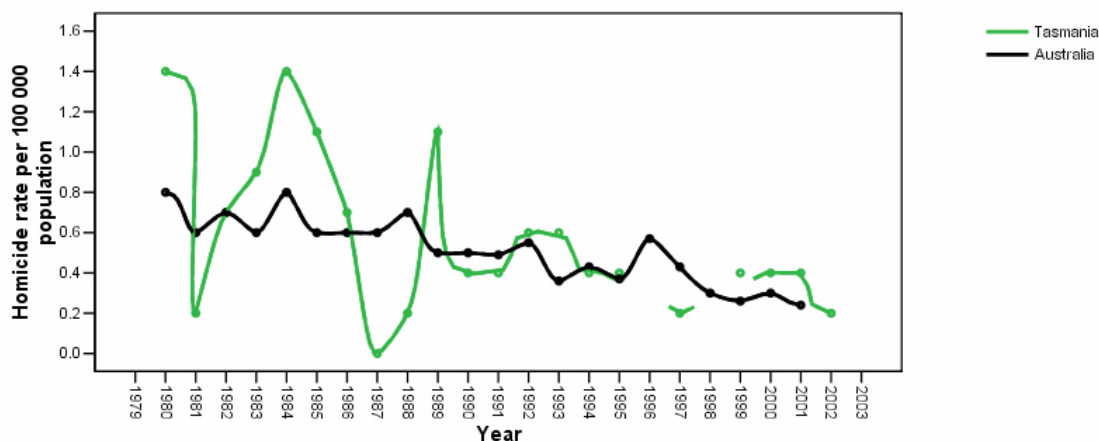
Australian Institute of Criminology Trends and Issues No. 230 (2002)

Firearm theft from dealers, police, military and private individuals have been decreasing throughout Australia. This suggests that firearms owners are being more vigilant in securing their firearms, making them less accessible to thieves. A further study on more recent data is being finalised by the Australian Institute of Criminology and the SSAA believes that this updated report will show that thefts from private firearms owners has continued the ongoing steady decline.

While more resources have been allocated to Australian Customs it is possible that the illicit firearms trade is becoming more organised. In the 2001-2002 financial year, Australian customs authorities seized 812 illegally imported firearms including 204 handguns, nearly three times the number seized in the previous year. Therefore, to conclude that Tasmania is safe from organised trafficking is premature.

What is happening – homicides

The actual number of firearm homicides each year in Tasmania is very low. When these are converted to rate per 100,000 population in Tasmania, even a change of 1 death can introduce marked fluctuations. However, since 1980 the trend in the firearm homicide rate has been downwards, reflecting the trends observed in other States. The rate of change following the NFA was not significantly different to that observed before its introduction.



What is happening – police resources

From the Auditor General’s report “Gun Control in Tasmania” the three largest groupings of firearm charges were in the categories:

1. Safe keeping and storage - 30% (1,468 charges);
2. Licence offences - 25% (1,222 charges); and
3. Possession of unregistered/prohibited firearms - 19% (926 charges).

While the SSAA fully support safe storage and have an extensive education program to encourage compliance with the legislation it is concerning that 55% of the charges laid in relation to firearm crime are of a ‘technical’ nature. While firearms legislation has re-classified breaches of safe storage to ‘indictable offences’ making such breaches a serious offence, it seems that police time is now spent enforcing technical compliance rather than addressing the flow of illicit firearms or the violent criminal use of firearms. This is further supported by the fact that very few firearms used to commit homicide in Australia are legally held (see AIC Trends and Issues 151).

Source of Tables: AIC National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP) Annual Reports

Licence and registration status of firearms used in homicide

	Victims		Offenders			
	Licensed	Registered	Licensed	Registered	Unlicensed	Unregistered
New South Wales	0	0	4	2	24	26
Victoria	1	0	0	0	10	10
Queensland	1	0	5	3	5	7
Western Australia	0	0	0	0	2	2
South Australia	1	1	0	0	13	13
Tasmania	0	0	1	1	2	2
Northern Territory	0	0	0	0	2	2
Australia	3	1	10	6	58	62
Total n ^(a)	69	69	68	68	68	68
Total %	4.4	1.5	14.7	8.8	85.3	91.2

(a) Excludes one offender who was exempt from the requirement to possess a firearms licence due to his occupation (police officer).

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, NHMP 2000–2001 [computer file]

Licence and registration status of firearms used in homicide

	Victims		Offenders			
	Licensed	Registered	Licensed	Registered	Unlicensed	Unregistered
New South Wales	0	0	2	1	21	22
Victoria	0	0	2	2	10	10
Queensland	1	1	0	0	3	3
Western Australia	0	0	1	1	5	5
South Australia	0	0	0	0	2	2
Tasmania	0	0	0	0	1	1
Northern Territory	0	0	0	0	1	1
Australia	1	1	5	4	43	44
Total n	52	52	48	48	48	48
Total %	1.9	1.9	10.4	8.3	89.6	91.7

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, NHMP 2001–2002 [computer file]

Licence and registration status of firearms used in homicide

	Victims		Offenders			
	Licensed	Registered	Licensed	Registered	Unlicensed	Unregistered
New South Wales	1	1	3	3	15	15
Victoria	0	0	2	1	3	4
Queensland	0	0	1	1	11	11
Western Australia	0	0	0	0	1	1
South Australia	0	0	1	1	6	6
Tasmania	0	0	0	0	1	1
Australian Capital Territory	0	0	0	0	0	0
Northern Territory	0	0	0	0	0	0
Australia	1	1	7	6	37	38
Total n	53	53	44	44	44	44
Total %	2	2	16	14	84	86

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, NHMP 2002–2003 [computer file]

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