

FIREARM DEATHS AND FIREARM CRIME AFTER GUN LICENSING IN TASMANIA

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*Paper presented at the 3rd National Outlook Symposium on Crime in Australia,
Mapping the Boundaries of Australia's Criminal Justice System
convened by the Australian Institute of Criminology
and held in Canberra, 22-23 March 1999*

Why Tasmania?

In terms of population, Tasmania is an insignificant part of Australia. With a population of less than half a million, it comprises only 2.6% of the total population. And in 1997 the resident population fell. Yet a paper on the impact of firearm regulation in Tasmania at a national conference can be justified.

First, Tasmanian gun laws were notoriously weak. Until 1 January 1993, when the *Guns Act* 1991 came into force, there was no system of licensing or registration of firearms other than pistols. Secondly, before the introduction of licensing for long-arms, Tasmania had one of the highest firearm suicide rates in Australia. Thirdly, Tasmania was reputed to have a very high rate of gun ownership. And finally, Port Arthur. Gun massacres were not new to Australia before 28 April 1996. But Port Arthur was the most shocking. Between 1987 and 28 April 1996 there were a total of 24 incidents involving multiple killings by firearm in Australia.¹ A total of 124 people were killed in these incidents, 35 of them at Port Arthur. The Port Arthur massacre provided the catalyst for an effective national response. On 10 May 1996, the Australasian Police Ministers' Council passed the first of a series of resolutions that were to form the basis of uniform firearm legislation. Further resolutions were passed on 17 July and 15 November. In a number of jurisdictions the process of implementation of these resolutions began with some limited amendments pending the introduction of more detailed reforms. This was the case in Tasmania. The *Guns Act* 1991 had, for the first time, introduced a system of licensing of all firearms. But only pistols and fully automatic guns had to be registered. The minister had the power under the Act to declare certain semi-automatic firearms 'prohibited guns' which would mean that a permit was required to possess such a weapon and it would have to be registered. This power was not exercised until 7 May 1996, nine days after Port Arthur. The *Prohibited Guns Order* 1996 declared four kinds of self-loading centre-fire firearms to be 'prohibited guns'. The *Firearms Bill* 1996, the legislation implementing the resolutions of the Australasian Police Ministers' Council, was assented to on 30 August. It commenced on 13 November 1996. This paper is an attempt to explore the impact of firearm regulation in Tasmania. Did the *Guns Act* 1991 with its system of licensing of all long-arms have any impact on firearm deaths or firearm crime? What impact did the more stringent *Firearms Act* 1996 have on firearms deaths and crime?

Sources of Data

This paper uses data obtained from a number of sources. A Criminology Research Council funded study of the impact of the *Guns Act* 1991 enabled information on gun related incidents to be extracted from coroners' records, public hospital records, police criminal offence and modus operandi reports (COMORs). Statistics were also obtained from the Police Department on recorded offences from manual collections prior to 1994 and from the Crime Analysis system from 1994 –1998. Australian Bureau of Statistics data was also used (recorded crime, mortality data and population data). The advantage of searching criminal offence and modus operandi reports was that it provided more information on firearm incidents and gave an indication of firearm use in property crime – data that cannot be extracted from the statistical collections.

¹ S Mukherjee and C Carcach, *Violence Deaths and Firearms in Australia: Data & Trends*, Australian Institute of Criminology, 1996, p 10.

Firearm Deaths

Suicide

For seven of the ten years before the *Guns Act* 1991 came into force, Tasmania had the highest firearm suicide rate in Australia. The average rate over this ten-year period was 6.8 deaths per 100,000; nationally the average rate was 3.2.² One of the aims of the *Guns Act* 1991 was to reduce suicide.³ Suicide accounts for the largest number of firearm deaths in Australia.⁴ Before 1993 between one in four and one in five suicides was committed with a firearm.⁵ In Tasmania the proportion was much higher - between one in two and one in three.⁶ There are a number of ways in which firearm legislation could impact on firearm suicide. Literature on firearms regulation suggests there is a positive correlation between the number of homes with firearms and firearm suicide.⁷ Advocates of gun control hoped that the debate on firearms that accompanied the legislation would increase the awareness of the dangers of firearms, causing some owners to dispose of the weapons. It was hoped that the introduction of a cooling-off period of 21 days between seeking a gun licence and obtaining a firearm would have the effect of reducing the firearm suicide rate.⁸ The impact of safe storage conditions should also lead to a decrease in the availability of weapons for spontaneous acts of suicide, particularly by male adolescents.

Table 1 indicates that while the number of suicides by firearms fluctuated in annual terms in the survey period, they decreased in the post *Guns Act* period by some 34 per cent compared with the pre *Guns Act* period. Information was extracted from Coroners' records to determine the impact of delaying the acquisition of a firearm by licensing requirements and cooling-off periods. The results suggest that the Act did reduce the number of spontaneous acts with recently acquired firearms. Information on when the gun was obtained was available for less than half of the suicides. Of those nearly half (22/48) in the pre *Guns Act* period committed suicide within 2 weeks of obtaining the firearm. In the *Guns Act* period, less than a quarter (8/34) did so. However a number of people managed to obtain a firearm without having a licence – more than half of those whose licence status was known (19/34).

² Ibid, 22 and 36.

³ *Parliamentary Debates, House of Assembly*, 18 June 1991, p 1821.

⁴ Ibid, 22.

⁵ Ibid, 5.

⁶ See Fig 2 below.

⁷ T Gabor, *The Impact of the Availability of Firearms on Violent Crime, Suicide and Accidental Death: a review of the literature with special reference to the Canadian situation*, Department of Justice, Canada, 1994; CH Cantor and PJ Slater, 'The Impact of Firearm Control Legislation on suicide in Queensland: Preliminary Findings' (1995) 162 *The Medical Journal of Australia*, 583-585.

⁸ The *Guns Act* 1991 s 22(5) provided that the Commissioner could not grant a licence sooner than 21 days after the application for the licence.

TABLE 1: Firearm Deaths, 1 Sept 1989 to 31 Dec 1992 and 1 Jan 1993 to 30 April 1996 compared

Date	Suicide	Accident	Killed by another	Unconfirmed	Total
1989	9	1	0	1	11
1990	38	3	1	2	44
1991	25	2	2	1	30
1992	43	2	2	3	50
Total pre Guns Act	115	8	5	7	135
1993	23	2	4	0	29
1994	33	1	1	0	35
1995	16	1	0	0	17
1996	4	0	36	1	41
<i>Total post Guns Act</i>	76	4	41	1	122

Source: Coroners' Records.

The rate and proportion of firearm suicide also declined in the period of 3 years and 4 months after the *Guns Act* came into force. In 1993 and 1994 the Tasmania firearm suicide rate remained the highest rate in Australia and it was second to the Northern Territory in 1995. But in 1996 and 1997 the Tasmanian rate was below both that of Northern Territory and Queensland. The firearm suicide rate has also been declining nationally since 1993 as has the proportion of suicides committed with a firearm. But not so the total suicide rate; this has been increasing and in 1997 it was 14.7 per 100,000. In contrast the Tasmanian total suicide rate has been declining since 1993 (see Fig 1). While it was still above the national rate from 1993 to 1996, in 1997 the rate was the lowest in Australia.

In summary, the *Guns Act* 1991 and the *Firearms Act* 1996 have been accompanied by a reduction in the number and rate of firearm suicides in Tasmania. Moreover there has also been a reduction in the total suicide rate since 1993. The displacement of firearms in suicide by other methods does not appear to have occurred in Tasmania.

Fig 1: Firearm suicide and total suicide, rates per 100,000 Australia and Tasmania, 1989-1997

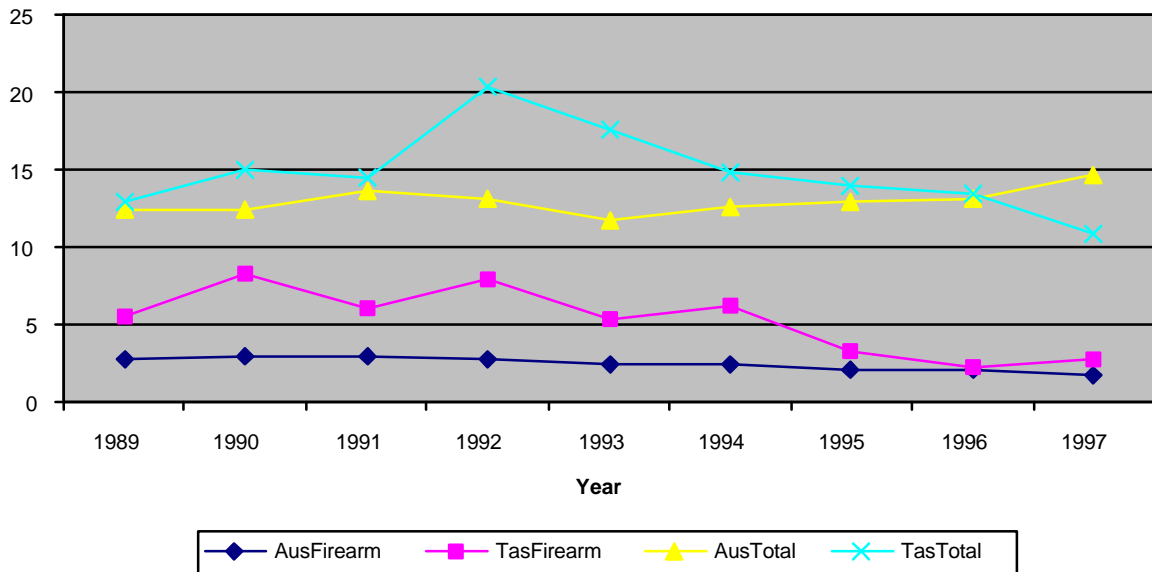
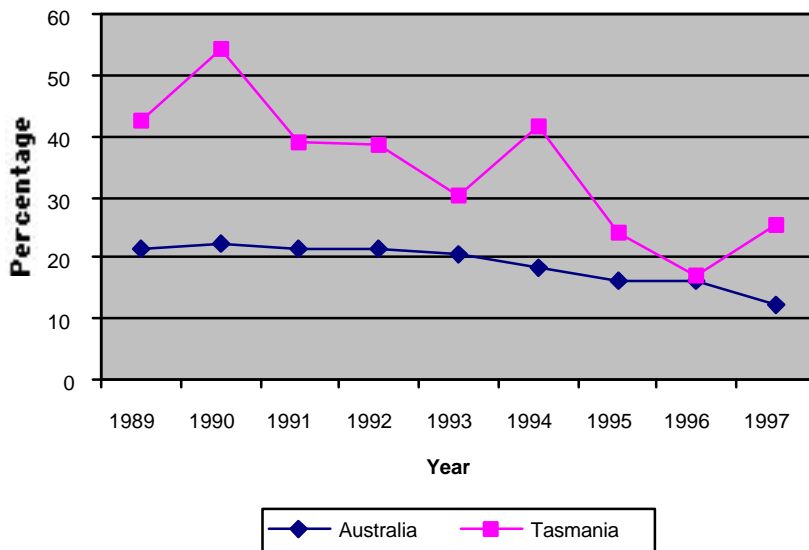


Fig 2 : Proportion of firearm suicides



Homicide

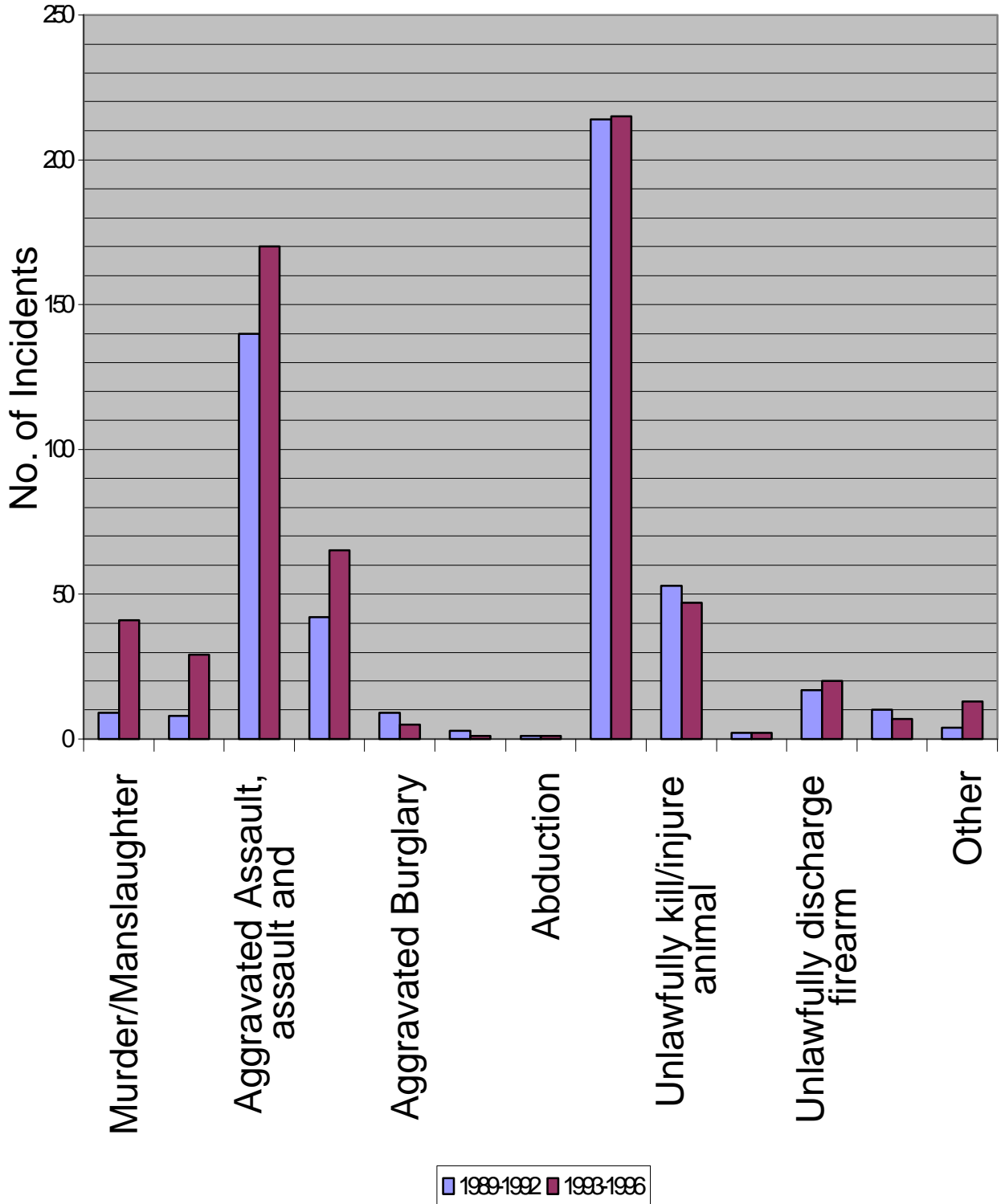
Tasmania has had a total homicide rate that is consistently below the national rate but a firearm homicide rate that fluctuates above and below it. It was hoped that the *Guns Act* would reduce the level of violence in the home, including of course, homicide. It was also hoped that by preventing access to guns by those with a propensity for violent crime or those otherwise unsuitable to possess a firearm, firearm massacres and multiple shooting would be reduced if not eliminated. Any discussion of the impact of the *Guns Act* on firearm homicide in Tasmania is overshadowed by the events at Port Arthur on 28 April 1996. Of the 36 homicides recorded in the first four months of 1996 (see Table 1) 35 were committed at Port Arthur. For many this was a spectacular demonstration of the failure of the *Guns Act* 1991. Thirty-five people were shot and killed by a man who owned a firearm with no licence to do so. Moreover the firearms - semi-automatics, with the capacity to kill 12 people in about 15 seconds - had not been prohibited by the legislation. Thus there was a dramatic increase in the number of firearm homicides in the three years four month period after the *Guns Act* came into force.

What has happened since Port Arthur? The firearm homicide rate in 1997 was below the national rate but the number of homicides in Tasmania is too small for any conclusions to be drawn from it.

Firearm use in Crime

Fig 3 shows a simple comparison between the number of firearm related incidents in the period in which the *Guns Act* 1991 was in operation (3 years and 4 months) and a period of the same length before it came into effect. There was an increase in the numbers of attempted murders, wounding and assaults involving a firearm, and armed robberies using firearms. However for property offences the picture is different. The number of incidents of injury to property was stable and there was a reduction in the number of incidents of unlawfully killing or injuring animals. Crimes shown to be most commonly associated with firearm use will now be discussed in more detail to ascertain the rates for particular crimes and to determine if the proportion of firearm use has changed since the enactment of the *Guns Act* 1991 and the *Firearms Act* 1996.

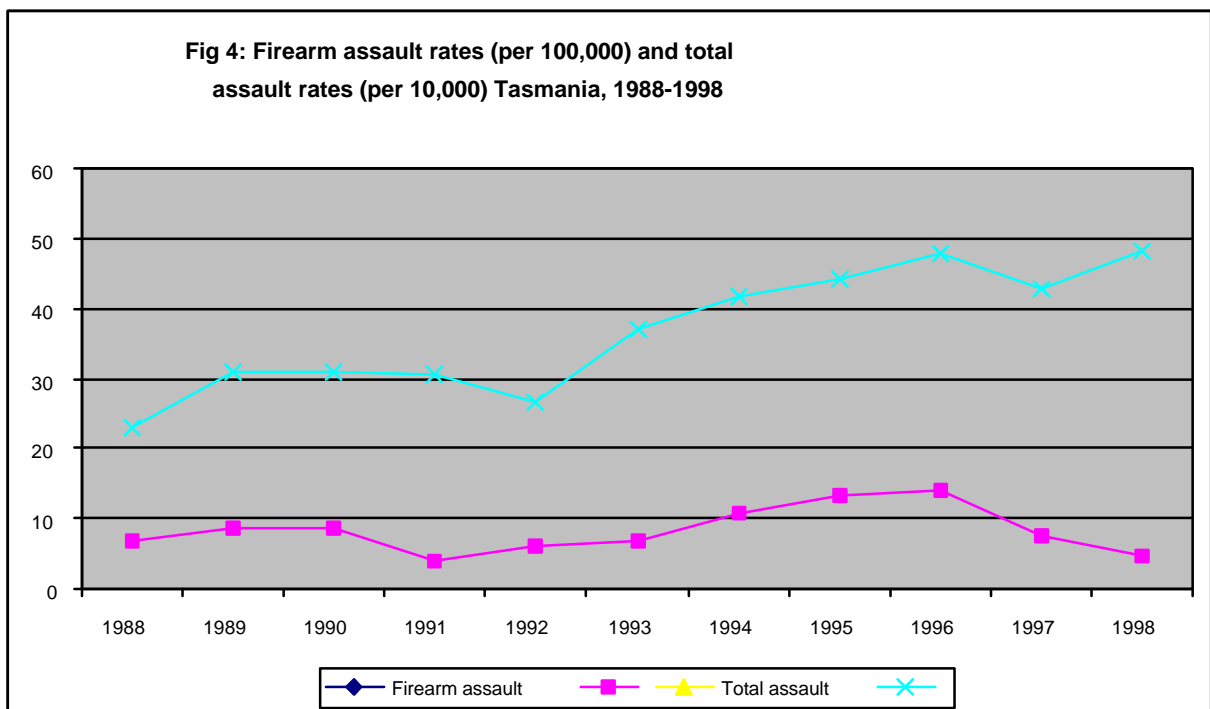
Fig 3: Firearm Related Incidents
 September 1989-December 1992 and January 1993-April 1996 compared



Assault, aggravated assault and wounding

The details of the assaults committed with a firearm contained in the criminal offence and modus operandi reports show that many of the incidents occurred in the context of a family dispute. About half were committed in dwelling houses. The firearm was actually discharged in a third of all incidents described as assault or aggravated assault, and in an additional 10 per cent the gun was known to be loaded. The descriptions of some of these incidents in the criminal offence and modus operandi report narratives illustrate the fear that can be caused by the very presence of firearms in a house when there is an argument. One incident described how the complainant tried to hide her drunken boy friend's guns during an argument before he got hold of one of them and threatened her with it. In a number of cases there was technically no assault with a firearm and so the incident was not counted as such, but the complainant's knowledge that the offender possessed firearms heightened her apprehension. One complainant was punched by her de facto when she was trying to prevent him going to the gun cupboard. In another incident, it was alleged a man assaulted his wife by grabbing her hair and punching her. He made several threats to shoot her, obviously made real by her knowledge that he owned two firearms. Similarly in another the offender hit the complainant – his de facto- with clenched fists, broke a window and threatened to get his gun out of the car to shoot her. Neighbourhood disputes that resulted in an assault with a firearm were quite common, caused by issues such as a messy yard, dogs and loud music. Cases in which the offender was unknown to the victim included cases of road rage and cases where pedestrians or the occupants of a car were fired at.

Fig 3 shows the number and rate of firearm assaults increased in the *Guns Act* period. There was a 21 per cent increase in the number of firearm assaults. Fig 4 shows the firearm assault rate also increased in the post Act period and the temporal behaviour of the total assault rate mirrored the firearm assault rate until 1996. Since the enactment of the *Firearms Act* 1996 the firearm assault appears to have declined. In 1997 both the firearm assault rate and the assault rate dropped and in 1998 the firearm assault rate continued to drop but the total assault rate increased.



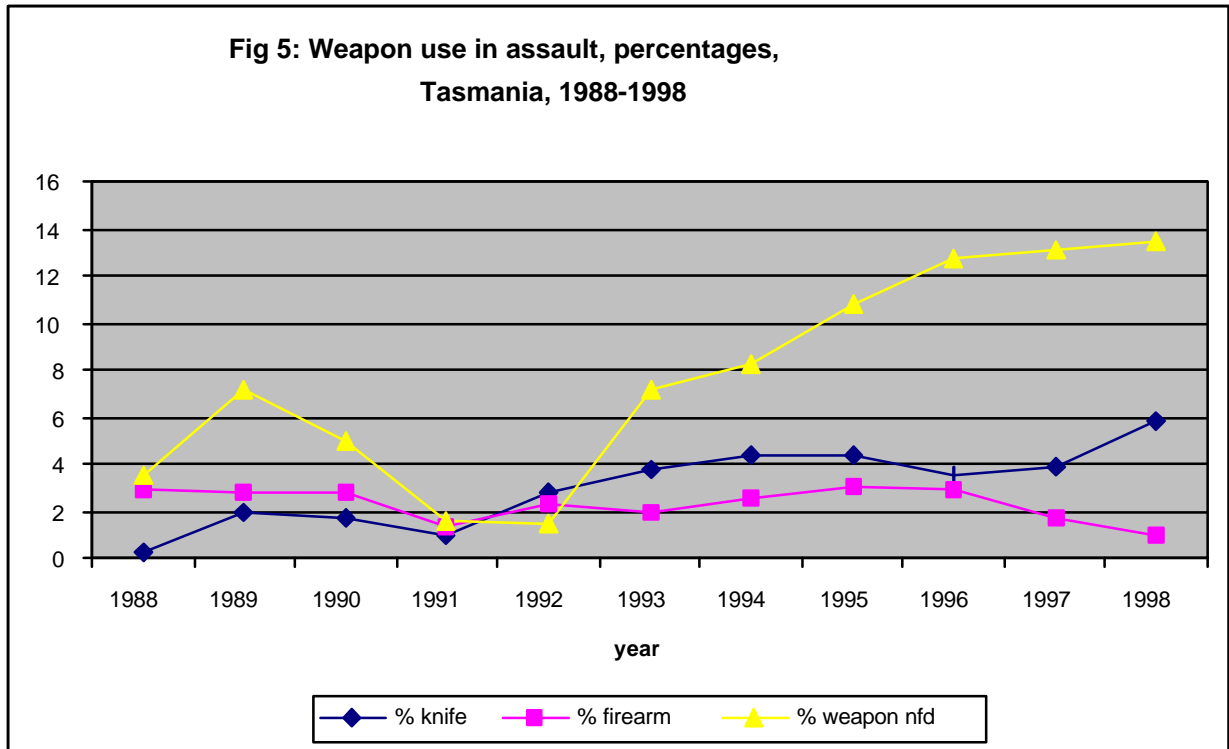


Fig 5 shows the proportion of assaults that were committed with a firearm remained relatively stable throughout the four years before and after the *Guns Act* came into force. But in 1997 and 1998 there was a reduction in the proportion of firearm assaults. Since 1988 the proportion of assaults with a knife have been gradually increasing, markedly so in 1997 and 1998. In these two years there appears to have been a displacement of firearms as a weapon of choice in favour of other weapons including knives.

From 1995 to 1997, Tasmania had the second highest firearm assault rate in Australia in contrast with a total assault rate which was the second lowest. The proportion of assaults that were committed with a firearm was more than double the national percentage. While the proportion of assaults committed with a firearm is likely to exceed the national percentage, the firearm assault rate of less than 4.6 is likely to be near the national rate rather than far in excess of it.⁹

⁹ The ABS counting rules differ from the rules used by the Police Department and are likely to result in a lesser rate because the police statistics count each different type of assault in an incident involving multiple assaults against one victim.

TABLE 2: Firearm assault victimisation rates, 1995-1997, Australia, States and Territories

	1995	1996	1997
Australia	3.5	3.5	4.5
Tasmania	8.2	13.3	6.8
NSW	3.5	3.7	4.9
Vic	1.8	1.8	3.5
Qld	5.2	4.0	5.8
SA	2.5	2.4	1.4
WA	1.8	1.4	2.7
NT	23.7	29.8	23.7
ACT	3.6	4.6	5.2

Source: ABS, National Crime Statistics, 1995, Recorded Crime, 1996, 1997

Armed Robbery

In the context of a rising armed robbery rate it was hoped that regulating firearms would restrict access to them by those committing robbery, many of whom commit the offence without much planning or preparation. But Fig 3 shows a significant increase in the number of armed robberies involving the use of a firearm in the period following the introduction of the *Guns Act* 1991. In percentage terms the increase is one of 51.2%. In most cases whether the gun was loaded was either not known or not recorded (almost 90%) but in 8% of incidents it was known to be loaded, usually because the gun was actually fired (6.5%). Although it is rare for the firearm to be actually discharged, nevertheless the potential for serious harm in such cases is obvious even if no harm is intended. In one case in 1994 for example, two offenders entered the office of a service station in the early hours of the morning. One pointed a loaded shotgun at the employee and demanded money. The shotgun discharged seriously injuring and permanently disabling the employee. It was accepted that discharging the gun was unintentional.¹⁰

An examination of firearm robbery rates shows that the rate continued to increase for the two years after the *Guns Act* came into force together with the armed robbery rate and the unarmed robbery rate. But in 1995 all rates dropped – firearm armed robbery, armed robbery and unarmed robbery. Thereafter the firearm armed robbery rate remained quite stable. Armed robbery increased but not as consistently as unarmed robbery. An analysis of the types of weapon used in robbery shows the extent to which other weapons have displaced firearms in robberies.

¹⁰ *R v Homes and Hancock*, Zeeman J, 30/11/1994; Tasinlaw, Sentencing database.

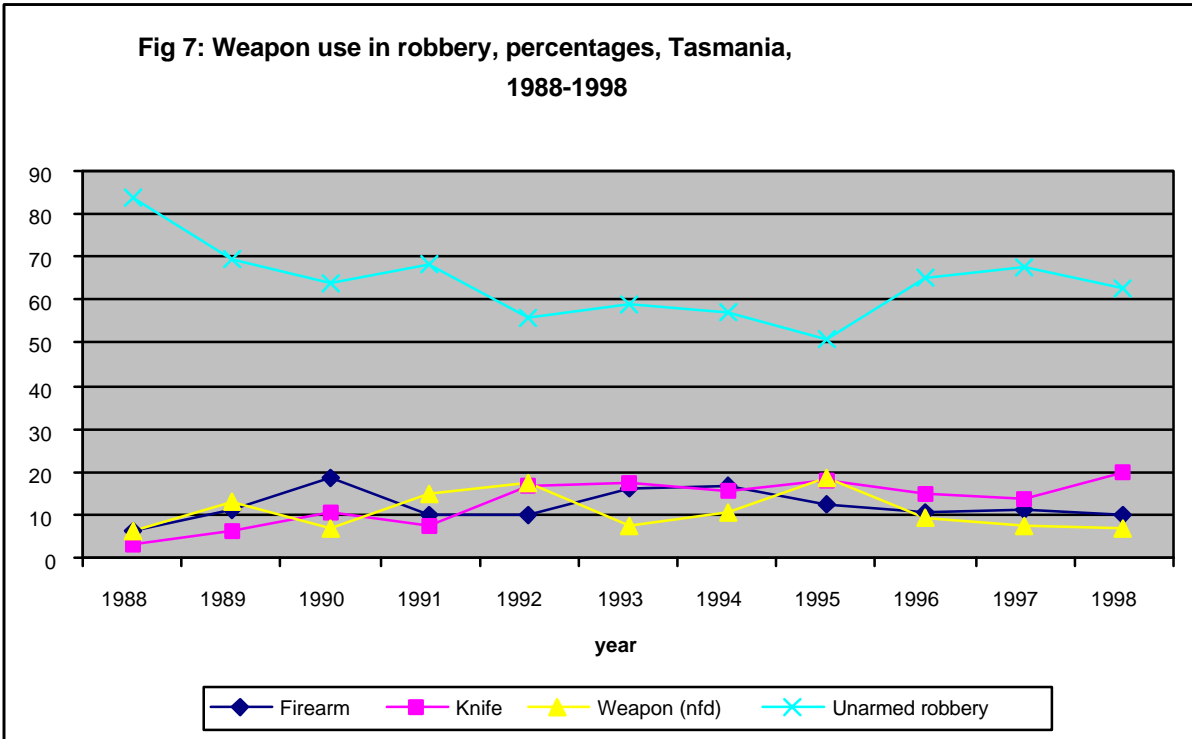
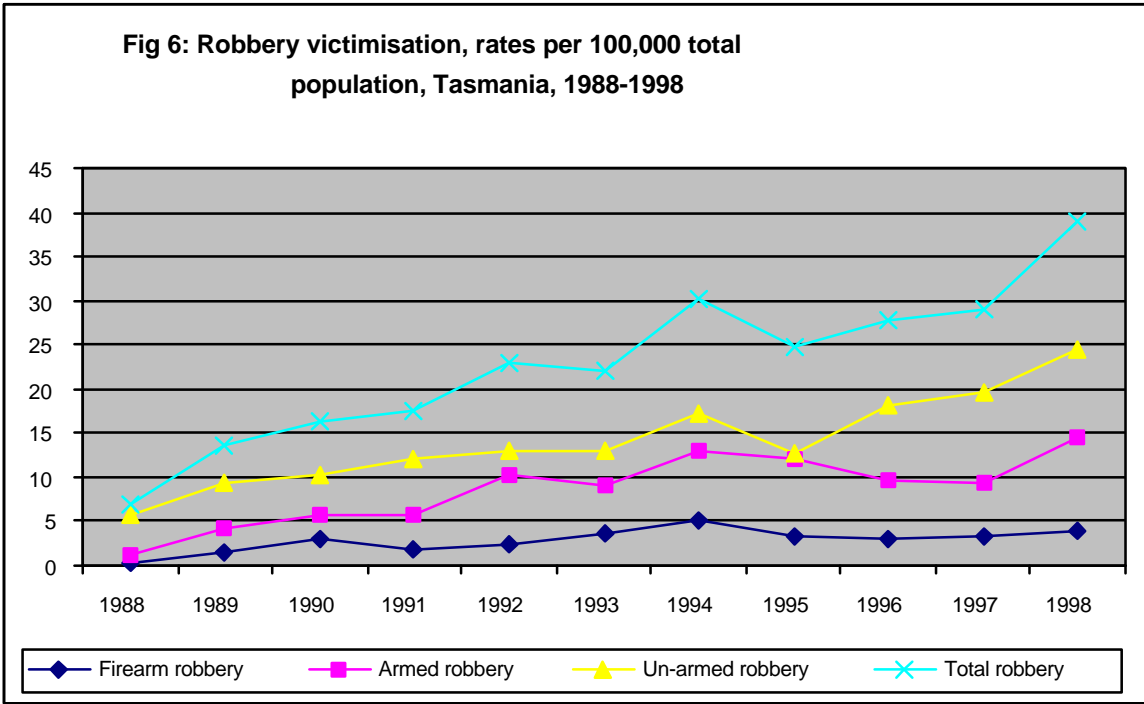


Fig 7 shows that since 1994 the proportion of robberies using firearms has dropped and to some extent knives appear to be displacing firearms in robberies. At the same time the proportion of unarmed robberies is also increasing.

From 1993-1997 Tasmania had the lowest robbery rate in Australia but while the firearm robbery rate was low it was not the lowest. In contrast the proportion of robberies which used a firearm as a weapon was higher than the national rate in most years from 1993 – 1997.

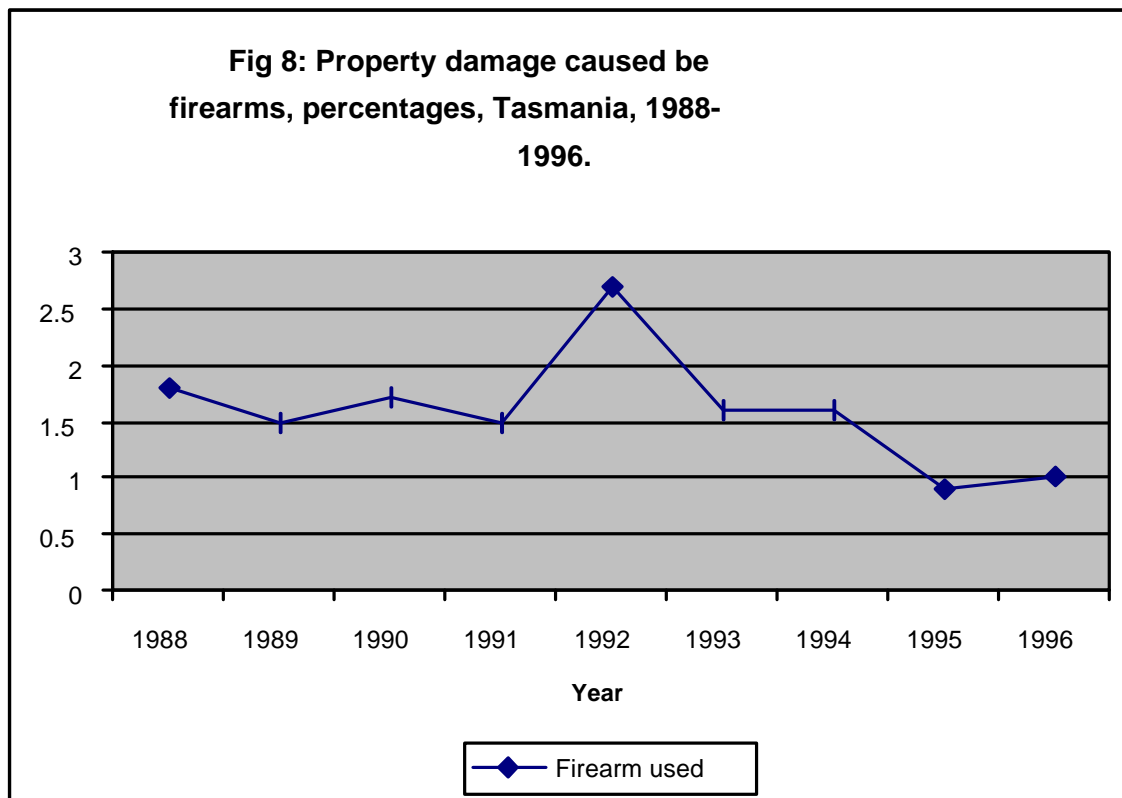
Damage to property

The analysis of the criminal offence and modus operandi reports showed that the most common offence in a firearm related incident in the study was damage to property (see Fig 3). There was no change in the number of incidents of firearm damage to property in the *Guns Act* period compared with pre Act period but the proportion of damage to property offences caused by a firearm declined from 1993 -1996. In 1992 there was an increase in the number and rate of firearm damage to property offences but the trend in the number and rate was generally downward from 1993. In contrast the number and rate of all damage to property offences increased significantly from 1993 to 1996 accompanied by a decrease in the proportion of such offences that were caused by gunfire see Fig 8).

TABLE 3: Firearm damage to property and total damage to property, rates per 100,000, Tasmania 1989-1997

	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
Firearm damage	11.7	11.4	11.5	11.4	19.8	15.1	18.0	11.2	14.6*
Total damage	665.0	746.6	677.2	739.7	732.8	889.8	1100.1	1168.6	2723.2

Source: COMORs and Police Department statistics, offences recorded 1988-1997



Data on firearm related damage to property can only be obtained by examining criminal offence and modus operandi reports. It cannot be extracted from the Crime Analysis system and so it is not available for the years 1997 and 1998. The position in relation to the number of firearm related incidents of killing or wounding animals is similar to that of damage to property (see Fig 3). There was no increase in incidents, rather a small decrease.

Hospital admissions for gunshot wounds

Based on a national survey of hospital admissions for 1992/3, it was estimated that about 500 hospital admissions each year in Australia are due to non-fatal firearm related injuries.¹¹ The study found that two thirds of the injuries related to firearms were unintentional. While very few died in hospital, the treatment of all hospitalised cases required over 4000 bed days. Clearly accidental gunshot wounds are a not insignificant problem in Australia.¹² Data was collected from public hospital records to determine if the *Guns Act* had any impact on the number of admissions for gunshot wounds. The data covered the following regions: the South, the North and the North-West.

TABLE 4: Hospital Admissions for Gunshot wounds, September 1989- April 1996

Year	South	North	North-West	Total
1989*	3	3	1	7
1990	18	13	7	38
1991	12	8	10	30
1992	23	17	14	54
Total: pre-Act	56	41	32	129
1993	8	12	16	36
1994	4	4	2	10
1995	0	11	7	18
1996*	22	1	1	24
Total: post-Act	34	28	26	88

Source: Public Hospital Records

* data for 1989 and 1996 includes 4 months only.

Table 4 shows there was a significant decrease in the number of admissions for gun shot wounds in 1994 and 1995. In 1996, in the first four months, there was a dramatic increase because of admissions as a result of the Port Arthur massacre. Despite this, in the *Guns Act* period there was a significant decrease in the number of hospital admissions for gun shot wounds. Information was available with respect to the number of bed days for 70% of patients. The average stay per patient was 6.7 days. The saving in suffering and cost from the apparent reduction in gunshot wounds has been substantial.

¹¹ J Harrison, J Moller and S Bordeaux, 'Injury by Firearms Australia 1994', <<http://www.nisu.flinders.edu.au>>

¹² Ibid, 9.

Firearm amnesties and compliance with licensing requirements

One of the aims of gun regulation and gun amnesties is to try and reduce the number of firearms in the community. There are difficulties with evaluating the impact of legislation in this respect. Both the extent of gun ownership before the legislation and the extent of compliance with it afterwards are unclear. Surveys can of some assistance in gauging the extent of gun ownership. In January 1989, as part of the International Crime Victims Survey, a question was asked about gun ownership. The responses indicated that an estimated 20.7% of Australian households own a gun, other than an air rifle. No estimate was possible of the number of guns this represents, but in 88% of cases it was a rifle or shotgun, 4.3% said it was a handgun, and 3.1% said they had both types. The other 4.6% were not sure what sort it was. Gun ownership was shown to be highest in rural areas and lowest in cities of one million or more. Therefore it is not surprising that the best estimate for the percent of households owning a gun in Tasmania in 1991 was between 40 and 45%.¹³ In 1992, the year before the *Guns Act* came into force, there were 8,200 registered pistols in Tasmania and 1,500 registered pistol shooters. The Tasmanian Government estimated in 1991 that there were 60,000 long arms in the State but the Firearms Registry considered it was more like 120,000.¹⁴ This latter figure would appear to be much closer to the real figure in the light of the number of licences issued under the *Guns Act* 1991 and the number of firearms surrendered for compensation under the *Firearms Act* 1996, s 146. The last figure for active licences under *Guns Act* 1991 before its repeal in 1996 was 56,786 licenses in the following categories:

Gun Licences	56402
Gun Dealers	133
Security Agents	107
Security Guards	144

The *Guns Act* 1991 contained a permanent amnesty by providing that no action should be taken against a person who voluntarily brought a gun to a police station and surrendered it to the Commissioner. It seems that very few guns were surrendered under this amnesty. So while many people complied with the *Guns Act* 1991 by obtaining licences for their firearms it seems the amnesty under the Act and the need for a licence had little impact in reducing the number of firearms. In contrast, Port Arthur and the new firearms regime, which included an amnesty and a buy-back, had a much greater impact. Most obviously the number of the most dangerous firearms in the community was considerably reduced. From 20 May until 30 September 1996 some 94 semi automatic guns were handed in Tasmania (748 firearms of all types were surrendered in this period). The permanent amnesty for the voluntary surrender of firearms that a person is not authorised to possess continued under the *Firearms Act* 1996. In addition, as agreed at the Australasian Police Ministers' Council Meeting of 10 May 1996, s 146 provided for compensation for 'prohibited guns', namely machine guns, self-loading rifles and shotguns and pump action shotguns which had been lawfully acquired before the commencement of the Act and which were surrendered within 12 months of its commencement. The national public education campaign, which accompanied the new legislation and the buy-back, was extensive. The Commonwealth government had promised to spend \$4 million on this campaign.¹⁵ The number of 'prohibited firearms' surrendered in

¹³ John Walker, 'The Extent of Gun Ownership in Australia', Australian Institute of Criminology, 29/8/1991.

¹⁴ Anita Scandia, Australian Institute of Criminology, 29 August 1991.

¹⁵ <<http://www.gun.law.gov.au/questions/>>

Tasmania was 34,564.¹⁶ There is some evidence that most people complied with the new laws by surrendering their prohibited firearms. The Newspoll survey in June/July 1997, commissioned by the Government to determine the efficacy of the public education campaign, revealed that approximately three quarters of firearm owners, who 12 months earlier possessed firearms prohibited under the Australasian Police Minister's Resolutions of 10 May 1996, had handed in their illegal firearms by the time of the survey. At this stage about three quarters of the total number of prohibited firearms finally collected had been handed in.¹⁷ From time to time there have been rumours of massive numbers of prohibited firearms being hidden in contravention of the firearms laws.¹⁸ But these remain unconfirmed rumours.

In addition to the removal of prohibited weapons from the community there is evidence that the total number of firearms in the community has been reduced.

- First, the Newspoll survey in June/July 1997 indicated that 16% of those who were gun owners at the time of Port Arthur had disposed of their illegal firearms and they no longer owned firearms of any kind.
- Secondly, in addition to surrendering prohibited firearms, many people handed in legal firearms. In Tasmania 4,296 legal firearms were surrendered for which no compensation was payable.
- Thirdly, the number of firearms surrendered was considerably more than the number of new legal firearms acquired. While 34,564 illegal firearms were surrendered, only 8,643 permits to acquire were issued under the *Firearms Act* 1996 (as at 28 February 1999). The position in other states appears to be similar. After the end of the buy-back it was claimed that in Victoria only one in twelve gun owners re-invested their compensation money in a new gun. In Western Australia, only one in six had. And astoundingly, in New South Wales, no new guns had been sold.¹⁹ Admittedly, the number of firearms unlawfully acquired is unknown, but is unlikely to significantly alter the fact that in Tasmania official figures indicate that there are nearly 30,000 less firearms now than before Port Arthur.
- Finally, the number of licenses issued under the *Firearms Act* 1996 is 25 % less than the number of current licences in force prior to the repeal of the *Guns Act* 1991.²⁰ While this could indicate that fewer people have complied with the *Firearms Act* 1996 than with the *Guns Act* 1991, the points made above would suggest that the more likely interpretation is that there are now less gun owners.

¹⁶ Figures provided to the Commonwealth to 30/6/1988 by the Firearms Registry. This number is slightly higher than the data in Table 5, which is based on spot compensation payments.

¹⁷ The number handed in by 25 August 1997 was 506,399. The final number was 643,300; <<http://www.gun.law.gov.au>>.

¹⁸ See *The Age*, 27 February 1999, News Extra p 2-3 for a report that in February 1998 a steel shipping container of hundreds of semi-automatics and military style firearms was buried on farm in the hills outside Hobart.

¹⁹ G Davies, *Firearms: A Global Problem from and Australian Perspective*, dissertation, UNE, Jan 1998, p 35 quoting R Wainwright, 'Gun Shy' Sydney Morning Herald, 4 October 1997.

²⁰ The following figures were obtained from the Firearms Registry:

Was the response to the buy-back greater in Tasmania than elsewhere?

TABLE 5: Firearms buy-back; number of firearms collected and number per 100 of total population as at 19 March 1998

Jurisdiction	Number collected	Number per 100
Tasmania	32,220	6.8
Northern Territory	9,472	5.1
Victoria	207,348	4.5
Queensland	130,726	3.8
South Australia	52,365	3.5
Western Australia	50,804	2.8
New South Wales	155,285	2.5
Australian Capital Territory	5,380	1.7
Total	643,600	3.5

Source: <<http://www.gun.law.gov.au/tally>>

Table 5 shows that, in population terms, the response to the buy-back was greatest in Tasmania with 6.8 weapons being handed in for every 100 persons. There are two possible reasons for this. First, the rate of gun ownership was likely to have been the highest in Tasmania. And secondly, the message of the public education campaign is likely to have resonated more strongly in Tasmania, a relatively small place where the shock of Port Arthur was most keenly felt.

Conclusion

Firearm regulation appears to have been effective in reducing gun suicide and gun crime in Tasmania. The number, rate and proportion of firearm suicides declined in the *Guns Act* period and continued to decline in 1996 and 1997. The result is that Tasmania no longer had the highest firearm suicide rate in 1996 and 1997. Moreover the total suicide rate also declined in Tasmania, whereas nationally, while the firearm suicide rate has been declining since 1993, the total suicide rate has increased. While there was an increase in the number and rate of firearm assaults in Tasmania in the period the *Guns Act* was in force, since 1996 the rate has declined. The proportion of assaults committed with a firearm has also declined in this period and in 1997 and 1998 there appears to have been a displacement of firearms as the weapon of choice in favour of knives. Tasmania has traditionally had a low assault rate but a high firearm assault rate, but now it is likely that the firearm assault rate is close to the national average. The firearm robbery rate increased for the first two years after the *Guns Act* came into force together with the armed robbery rate and the rate for unarmed robbery. But in 1995 all rates dropped. From 1996 to 1998 the firearm robbery rate remained quite stable while the unarmed robbery rate in particular increased. Since 1994 the proportion of robberies committed with a firearm has decreased; to some extent knives have replaced guns and the proportion of unarmed robberies has increased.

There was no increase in the number or rate of firearm related damage to property incidents caused by a firearm in the *Guns Act* period. But the number and rate of damage to property offences increased and the proportion of damage to property offences caused by a firearm decreased. No figures are available in respect of the period since the *Firearms Act* has been in force.

After the enactment of the *Guns Act* there was a significant decrease in the number of hospital admissions for gun shot wounds. Again, no data has been collected on the period since the *Firearms Act* was passed.

A declining firearm suicide rate, a declining firearm assault rate, a stable firearm robbery rate with a declining proportion of robberies committed with a firearm and a declining proportion of damage to property offences committed with a firearm suggests that firearm regulation has been effective in Tasmania. Research is necessary to determine if the legislation has had the same impact in other jurisdictions, particularly those where there were lower rates of gun suicide and gun crime and the legislation did not have the same degree of impact in reducing the number of firearms per capita.