



No.75

Firearms Homicide in Australia

Carlos Carcach & P.N. Grabosky

Through its National Homicide Monitoring Program the Australian Institute of Criminology has analysed over 2000 Australian homicides which occurred in the last seven years. These 470 incidents involved 586 victims — 24 per cent of all homicide victims. In 94 per cent of firearm incidents the offender was a male.

The paper highlights that 35 per cent of all firearm homicides involved intimate partners, and 1 in 5 of all firearm homicides was followed by the suicide of the offender. The policy response here must focus on violence prevention in the broadest sense.

Forty-six per cent of firearms incidents involved a weapon that is (now) prohibited or restricted as a result of the initiatives following the Port Arthur tragedy of 1996. These incidents accounted for 55 per cent of the victims of firearm homicide.

This paper is part of the Institute's increased focus on firearms and violence, and by reporting patterns and trends it will add to policy relevant data which will help shape a less violent Australia.

Adam Graycar
Director

In this paper, the term *homicide* refers to a person killed, and a *homicide incident* is an event in which one or more persons are killed at the same place and time. The paper focuses on homicide incidents where the offender used a firearm to kill the victim(s). In 1995-96 the proportion of homicides committed with a firearm is 21 per cent, a figure much lower than that which prevailed twenty years ago (the proportion then was around 40 per cent; see figure 1).

This paper identifies patterns and trends in firearm homicide incidents in Australia. It seeks to determine the extent to which homicide incidents involving firearms differ in any significant respect from other homicide incidents. It is envisaged that analysis of this kind will permit more precise monitoring of patterns and trends in firearms use in the aftermath of the new firearms regulations introduced in 1996-97 by State and Territory governments.

The data on which this is based were collected as part of the National Homicide Monitoring Program established in 1989 at the Australian Institute of Criminology. This program routinely collects data on some 47 variables relating to each incident of homicide coming to police attention in Australia and includes data relating to the victim, the suspect or perpetrator (where one has been identified) and the setting or context within which the incident occurs, including time, location, and weapon employed. Data are extracted by Institute staff from the homicide case records of each State and Territory police agency in Australia. A total of 2226 incidents were recorded for the period from 1 July 1989 until 30 June 1996, involving 2415 victims and 2652 perpetrators or suspects. These totals differ because some incidents involved more than one victim and/or perpetrator. Moreover, these totals may differ slightly from those derived from

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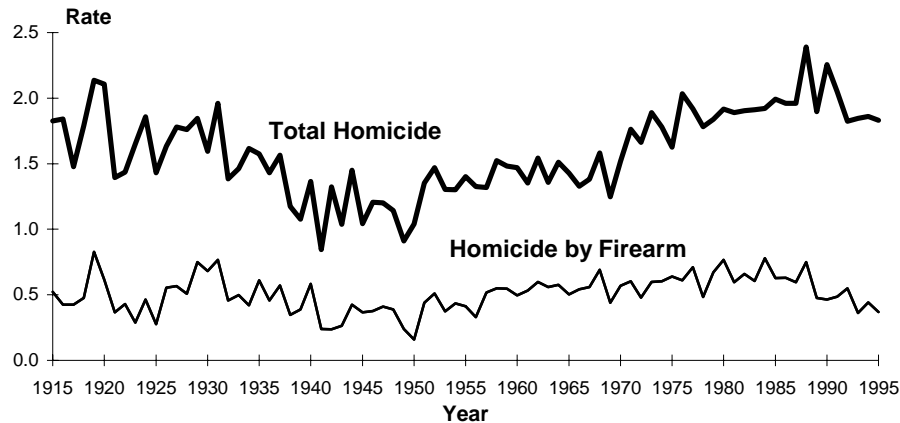
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Figure 1: AUSTRALIA, Total Homicide and Homicide by Firearm, Rate per 100 000 Total Population, 1915-95



Source: AIC analysis of ABS *Causes of Death*, Cat No. 3303.0.

other data bases, such as those relating to vital statistics and causes of death. These marginal differences are unlikely to detract significantly from the comparisons made and the inferences drawn in this paper.

As Figure 2 shows, firearms are now used in slightly more than 20 per cent of Australian homicide incidents. As Table 1 illustrates, there is minor variation across the States and Territories of Australia in terms of firearm homicide incidents as a proportion of all homicide incidents. Firearms are a less common instrument of homicide in Western Australia and the Northern Territory, and more common in Tasmania. These data are not distorted by the Port Arthur shootings of 1996, which are counted as one incident in the present analysis.

Regional Variations

Despite firearm-related homicide being a predominantly urban phenomenon (a little less than 8 in 10 firearm-related homicide incidents occurred in urban areas), there is a significantly greater likelihood that homicide incidents in rural Australia will involve firearms. A recent study by Carcach (forthcoming) using Australian Bureau of Statistics data on causes of death for the period 1989-96, found that remote rural areas had the highest risk of firearm-related homicide. On the other hand, metropolitan areas had the lowest risk of firearm-related homicide.

Table 1: AUSTRALIA, STATES AND TERRITORIES, Firearm Homicide Incidents as a Percentage of Total Homicide Incidents, 1989-90 to 1995-96

State/Territory	Total Homicide Incidents	Firearm Incidents as % of Total Incidents
New South Wales	749	22.3
Victoria	432	22.5
Queensland	452	20.8
Western Australia	226	14.2
South Australia	170	24.1
Tasmania	41	41.5
Northern Territory	144	13.9
Australian Capital Territory	10	20.0
Australia⁽¹⁾	2224	21.1

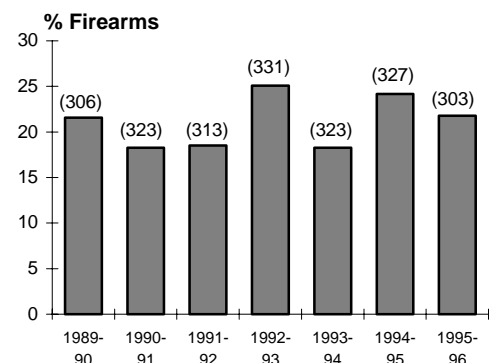
1. Excludes two incidents where jurisdiction was not stated.

Firearms in Different Categories of Homicide Incidents

As previous studies have demonstrated, not all homicides are alike. Over the seven-year period covered by the National Homicide Monitoring Program, a variety of types of homicide have been identified, which differ significantly in terms of surrounding circumstances and victim-offender relationships. In this paper, the following categories of homicide are considered:

- **Contract killing**
- **Suicide pact**
- **Carelessness.** This category often includes accidental death where a person is charged with manslaughter.
- **Disputes over drugs or money.** These tend to arise from conflicts relating to the sale of illicit drugs, or occurring in the course of legitimate commercial relationships.
- **Revenge**
- **Homicides occurring in the course of a robbery**
- **Mental disorder.** Homicides of this category are committed by a person with mental illness or developmental disability.
- **Intimate partner.** Homicides occurring within an intimate relationship or around the time of the dissolution of an intimate relationship.

Figure 2: AUSTRALIA, Firearm Homicide Incidents as a Percentage of Total Homicide Incidents, 1989-90 to 1995-96



Note: Total number of homicides shown in brackets

- **Trivial altercation.** A minor dispute, usually between males, which escalates with fatal consequences.
- **Sexual Assault.** Homicides occurring within the context of a sexual assault.
- **Child abuse.** When a child is killed by a parent, step-parent or de facto partner.

These categories are general and the identification of the circumstances of a case and its assignment to a category are problematic, as it depends upon the quality and quantity of data available from police records. As Table 2 illustrates, firearm use is much more common in certain types of homicide incidents than in others.

Firearms are less likely to be used in homicides resulting from child abuse, sexual assault or trivial altercation than other types of homicide. On the other hand, contract killings, carelessness and suicide pacts are more likely to involve firearms than other types of homicides. It should be noted however, that these three types of homicide are relatively rare, together contributing less than 10 per cent of all homicide incidents.

Use of Firearms by Homicide Offenders

Gender

Rarely do women, whose likelihood of committing homicide is

Figure 3: AUSTRALIA, 1989-90 to 1995-96, Firearm Homicide Incidents as a Percentage of Total Homicide Incidents, Racial Background of Suspect/Accused

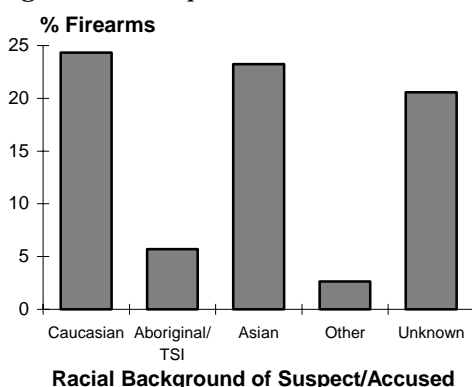


Table 2: AUSTRALIA, Firearm Homicide Incidents, Total and Percentage of Homicide Incidents According to Type, 1989-90 to 1995-96

Category	Firearm Incidents in each Category as % of all Firearm Homicide Incidents	Firearm Incidents as % of Total Homicide Incidents for each separate Category	Total number of Homicide Incidents
Contract Killing	2.8	92.9	14
Suicide Pact	2.1	62.5	16
Carelessness	4.9	56.1	41
Disputes over Drugs	6.4	40.5	74
Revenge	9.8	31.3	147
Disputes over Money	4.7	28.2	78
Between Intimate Partners	34.5	23.6	685
Robbery	8.9	22.3	188
Mental Disorder	4.5	22.3	94
Other/Unknown	15.7	17.3	428
Trivial Altercation	5.1	8.0	301
Sexual Assault	0.6	3.6	84
Child Abuse	0.0	0.0	76
Total	100.0	21.1	2226

low in any event, resort to homicide by firearm. Of all homicides involving a firearm, in 94 per cent of cases the offender was a male. Twenty per cent of male homicide offenders and 10 per cent of female homicide offenders used a firearm. However, it must be noted that 90 per cent of all homicide offenders were male. That means that 1.29 per cent of all homicides were committed by a female with a firearm.

Racial Appearance

Rarely do Indigenous Australians resort to homicide by firearm. As Figure 3 illustrates, Indigenous Australians, who have rates of homicide far above the Australian average, are much less likely to use firearms than other means of killing. This would appear to reflect the type of homicide most commonly involving Indigenous people: the escalation of inter-personal disputes in circumstances involving significant alcohol consumption.

Age

The average age of perpetrators of firearm homicides was 36.7 years, which was significantly older than the average age of perpetrators of

homicides by other means (31.6 years).

Marital Status

Perpetrators who are separated or divorced are marginally more likely than those married or in a de facto relationship, and much more likely than never married perpetrators, to use firearms.

Types of Firearms Used

The database of the National Homicide Monitoring Program at the Australian Institute of Criminology classifies the firearms used by homicide offenders according to type of firearm and to the new Australian firearm regulations approved in the Police Ministers' meeting on 10 May 1996, two weeks following the Port Arthur massacre. While classification of firearms according to their type is available for the whole seven-year period, classification according to the new firearms regulations is available only for those incidents recorded since 1 July 1992.

This analysis is based on the classification contained in the new firearms legislation. The National Homicide Monitoring Program collects data on the type of firearm according to the following

Figure 4: AUSTRALIA, 1989-90 to 1995-96, Firearms Homicides (n=470), Distribution according to Class of Firearms

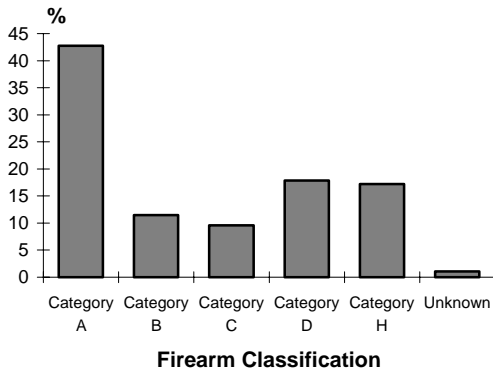
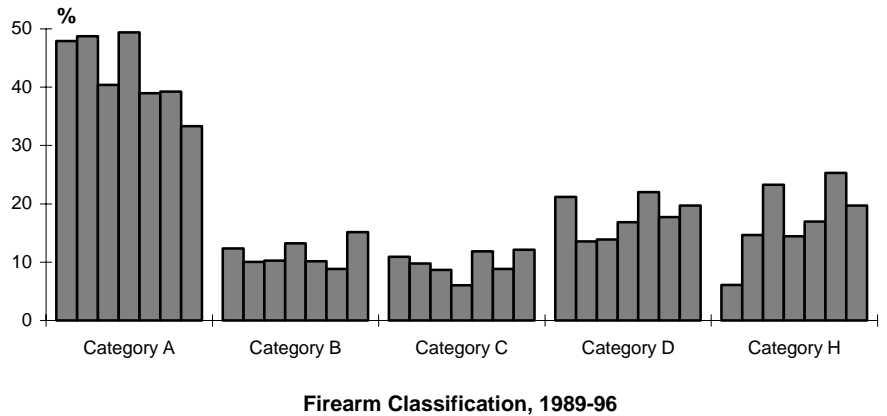


Figure 5: AUSTRALIA, 1989-90 to 1995-96, Firearms Homicides (n=470), Distribution per year according to Class of Firearms



Firearm Classification categories as contained in the new Firearms Legislation of each State and Territory

Category A: air rifles, rimfire rifles (excluding self-loading), single and double-barrelled shotguns.

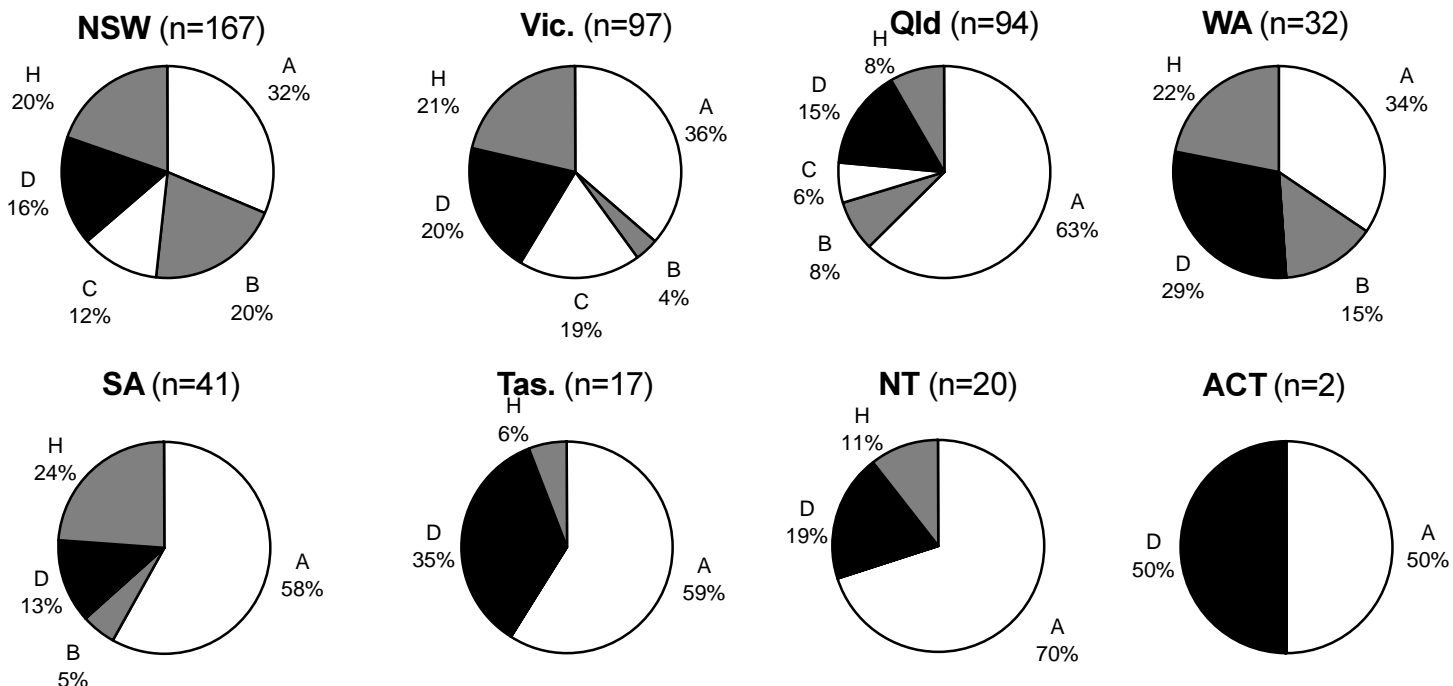
Category B: muzzle-loading firearms, single shot, double barrelled and repeating action centre fire rifles, break action shotguns/rifle combinations.

Category C: (prohibited except for occupational purposes): self-loading rimfire rifles with a magazine capacity no greater than 10 rounds, self-loading shotguns with a magazine capacity no greater than 5 rounds, pump action shotguns with a magazine capacity no greater than 5 rounds.

Category D: (prohibited except for official purposes): self-loading centre fire rifles, self-loading shotguns and pump action shotguns with a capacity of more than 5 rounds, self-loading rimfire rifles with a magazine capacity greater than 10 rounds.

Category H: (restricted): all handguns, including air pistols.

Figure 6: AUSTRALIA, 1989-90 to 1995-96, Firearm Homicide Incidents, Distribution According to Jurisdiction and Class of Firearm Used



categories: shotgun, handgun, automatic/semi-automatic weapon, .22 rifle, .303 rifle, and a residual category called other. Starting from firearm homicide incidents occurring on or after 1 July 1992, additional data were collected to enable classification of firearms according to the new legislation. In order to classify the firearms used in incidents recorded before 1 July 1992, a statistical procedure to map the old firearm classification into the classification according to the new legislation was applied to the data.¹

Figure 4 shows that in 43 per cent and 11 per cent of incidents involving firearms, the firearm was classified as belonging to categories A and B respectively (see page 4 for definition of categories). These 54 per cent of incidents (253 in all) accounted for 45 per cent of the victims (263) who were killed by firearms. Ownership of firearms in these two categories is neither prohibited nor restricted. The remaining 46 per cent of homicides were committed by offenders using firearms in the prohibited/restricted categories. These 46 per cent of incidents (216 in all) accounted for 55 per cent of victims (322).

Figure 5 shows the distribution of firearms according to their classification for each financial year over the period from 1 July 1989 to 30 June 1996.

Figure 5 suggests a slightly downward trend in the use of firearms classified in category A, that is, air rifles, rimfire rifles (excluding self-loading), single and double-barrelled shotguns over the seven-year period covered by this study. On the other hand, while there is a weak trend towards increased use of firearms that are prohibited except for official purposes (category D), the upward trend in the use of handguns

(category H) is evident from Figure 5. Use of firearms in the remaining categories (that is, B and C) has remained relatively constant during the seven years from 1 July 1989 to 30 June 1996.

The distribution of firearm homicide incidents according to firearms classification and jurisdiction is shown in Figure 6. The numbers of firearm homicide incidents recorded in each jurisdiction during the seven-year period under study are shown in brackets. No attempts should be made to compare jurisdictions on the basis of Figure 6, as the numbers of firearms homicides are too small to support any comparative inference. Figure 6 shows that firearms in category A are more commonly used to commit homicide in all jurisdictions. In all States apart from Queensland and Tasmania, handguns were used for between 20 and 25 per cent of firearms homicides.

Victims of Firearm Homicide Incidents

Just as the association of firearms varies with certain types of homicide and certain perpetrator characteristics, so too are some victim characteristics more closely associated with firearm homicides. Results show that:

- 2 out of 3 victims of firearm-related homicide are males, a distribution similar to that of victims of homicides committed by other means;
- Age is not a factor associated with being a victim of firearm homicide. There are no significant differences between the proportions of victims of firearm-related homicide in each age group;
- Aboriginal victims are much less likely to be killed by firearms than victims with other racial appearances; and
- Victims who are married, in a de facto relationship, separated or divorced are

more likely to be killed by firearms than other victims.

Murder-Suicides and Multiple Homicides

Over the seven-year period of this review, 160 offenders committed suicide following the homicide. Approximately 58 per cent of these offenders used a firearm.

What this means is that in 1 in 5 of all firearm homicide incidents the perpetrator turned the weapon on himself after the event.

Given the efficiency of firearms as a lethal weapon, one would expect that firearms would figure more prominently in those homicide incidents involving more than one victim. The death toll in those mass shootings which have occurred in recent Australian history would be hard to achieve by other means (aside, perhaps from the use of explosives). A firearm was used in 45 per cent of multiple homicide incidents. This contrasts with 20 per cent of single victim homicide incidents involving firearms.

Policy Implications

The reduction of firearms homicide in Australia will prove no easy task. Policy interventions can be more successful in preventing the use of firearms in some types of homicides than others. Among the more difficult are those firearms homicides which are perpetrated in the course of professional criminal activity, such as drug dealing and contract murder. These can only be addressed by persistent, aggressive investigation and enforcement.

Those homicides which occur in the context of intimate relationships or around the time of their dissolution, which account for 34 per cent of all firearm-related homicides, may be only slightly easier to control. Certainly, provisions in new national legislation which permit confiscation of firearms and/or suspension of

1. The procedure in question is a form of "Iterative Proportional Fitting". Full details about the methodology can be obtained from the first author on request.

licences to use firearms when a domestic violence order is imposed would contribute to the reduction of firearm-related deaths. Provision of support services after the dissolution of an intimate relationship and follow up of former male partners known to have previous histories of criminal violence, are among the interventions that might prevent further violence, with or without the future involvement of firearms.

Slightly fewer than 10 per cent of firearm-related homicides are the result of revenge or retaliation, and these cases often involve males. These incidents tend to be less amenable to short-term policy interventions. The educational system may be the best place to begin addressing this issue. Development of skills on how to handle conflict should be a priority of educational programs from pre-school throughout the secondary level.

Although only over 4 per cent of firearm-related homicides appear to be associated with mental disorder, restrictions on access to firearms by those who may be at risk of aggressive behaviour as a result of mental health problems are now widely regarded as appropriate.

The new firearms regulations introduced in the aftermath of the Port Arthur massacre have the potential to reduce the number of firearms-related homicides in Australia. The overall reduction in the firearms inventory achieved in the buyback will reduce the number of weapons available for misuse. New licensing and registration provisions should make it more difficult for irresponsible or otherwise unsuitable people to obtain legal access to firearms. This may also assist in reducing the more spontaneous forms of firearms homicide, such as those arising from trivial altercations.

Enhanced sentences for firearm-related offences generally might also contribute to a reduc-

Firearms: Main Findings

- Homicide incidents occurring in rural areas are more likely to involve firearms than those in urban areas.
- Over one-third of firearm homicide incidents occurred within the context of an intimate relationship or were associated with the termination of an intimate relationship.
- Whereas for all homicides the perpetrators are most likely to be never married, firearm homicide perpetrators are most likely to be separated or divorced, followed by those married or in a de facto relationship, and are least likely to be never married.
- A little over 1 in 20 firearm homicide incidents were the result of trivial altercations, or within the context of sexual assault or child abuse.
- Homicide incidents occurring during daylight hours are more likely to involve firearms than those occurring at other times of the day.
- 94 per cent of offenders in homicide incidents involving firearms were males.
- 2 out of 3 victims of firearm homicide are males.
- Age is not a factor associated with being the victim of a firearm homicide.
- Whereas for all homicides the average age of perpetrators was 31.6 years, for firearm perpetrators the average was significantly higher at 36.7 years.
- While Indigenous people have a homicide rate that is 6 times that of non-Indigenous people, their use of firearms is very rare (around 5 per cent).
- Forty-six per cent of firearm homicide incidents were committed by offenders using prohibited or restricted firearms (Categories C, D and H according to the classification introduced in the new firearms legislation). These incidents accounted for 55 per cent of firearm homicide victims.
- Firearms are more likely to be used in homicide incidents involving multiple victims than in those where there is a single victim.

tion in firearm homicide (McDowall et al. 1992), although overseas experiences may not be generalisable to Australian conditions. Since the Port Arthur massacre, many law-abiding Australian shooters have made significant sacrifices in furtherance of public safety. It is appropriate that individuals who would use firearms for criminal purposes be penalised accordingly.

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