

Australia's Gun Laws Can't Work in America – For Now

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Thirteen mass shootings in 18 years, 112 victims shot dead. While this may seem to describe contemporary America, it actually describes a late 20th-century period in Australia. The country's final slaughter occurred in Tasmania in 1996 – the Port Arthur massacre. A lone, "pathetic social misfit" – as described by the judge – killed 35 people. The first 29 bullets from this young man's AR-15 rifle ended the lives of 20 innocents [in just 90 seconds](#).

For Australians, Port Arthur was the last straw. Newly elected Prime Minister John Howard – the country's most conservative leader in decades – proposed national gun laws, pledging to never "go down the American path" with regard to gun policy. With the backing of all major political parties and 90% support in the opinion polls, it took the Howard government [only 12 days](#) to persuade [all eight states and territories](#) to adopt [nationally uniform gun control laws](#). Two massive federal gun buybacks and 27 uncompensated firearm amnesties in the 22 years since have seen [well over a million firearms](#) cut up and sent to the smelter.

Australian mass shootings [simply ceased](#). The risk of an Australian dying by a gunshot [fell by more than half](#), and hasn't risen since 1996. One study even showed a nearly-80% drop in the rate of [gun suicide](#) after the implementation of Howard's decisive policies. Although – as in most Western countries – Australia's rate of firearm-related death was already falling, the rate of decline [doubled after the reforms](#). Australia's rate of gun homicide is now [25 times lower](#) than the United States.

To public health practitioners, the gun is to gun violence as the mosquito is to malaria. As an agent of harm, the gun should be amenable to standard injury prevention procedures. Already, Americans have shown the world how successful such measures can be in the case of the automobile; the United States was able to slash road deaths with lifesaving laws and traffic calming measures. Using similar principles of public health, America saved millions of lives and countless taxpayer dollars by reducing the health cost of HIV/AIDS and tobacco-related disease, and the world followed its example. Why has the same not happened with guns? The answer lies in both history and ideology.

Along with almost all colonies of European empires in the early twentieth century – about 150 now-independent countries – Australia adopted three pillars of gun control: licensing gun owners, registering each of their firearms, and treating private gun ownership as a conditional privilege, not a right. These measures are similarly applied to cars. Few doubt the public safety value of licensing drivers and registering vehicles, or that those who flout the rules of the road should risk losing the right to drive. Yet, in most American states the Second Amendment is invoked to prohibit even gun owner licensing and firearm registration. Losing the right to a gun seems out of the question in America, where many believe the Second Amendment guarantees a wider right to bear arms than it in fact does. To clarify, although the US Supreme Court does protect an individual right to possess a firearm primarily within the home, it also notes that the Second Amendment right is not unlimited. The Court [specifically leaves open](#) the right of states to prohibit carrying hidden handguns, to keep firearms away from schools, and to prohibit the carrying of "dangerous and unusual weapons", a provision which might extend, for example, to firearms described as assault weapons.

What some seem to overlook is that the Second Amendment is just an amendment. Americans are free to introduce or repeal a constitutional amendment whenever they choose, as they did to expand suffrage to all citizens, end slavery, and introduce/repeal prohibition. Given the frequency of mass shootings with no turning point in sight, real change seems unlikely until America's gun death toll worsens drastically. For this reason alone, such an obvious step to curb armed violence should not remain unmentionable.

In Australia, the Port Arthur massacre was both the country's tipping point and its awakening. [Research shows](#) that in the 18 years before the killings stopped, half of the mass shooting victims in Australia were shot by licensed gun owners, while very few were killed by career criminals. Three-quarters were shot by a man with no previous history of mental illness. With such evidence in mind, and to lessen the risk of another such tragedy, Australia chose to reduce the availability of semi-automatic long guns to prevent future tragedies. Originally marketed by gun dealers as "assault weapons", these had become the weapon of choice for mass killers. By directly targeting the agent of harm, Australian Prime Minister John Howard left a proud legacy acclaimed even by his opponents. Although eventually the million banned and destroyed semi-automatic firearms were replaced by a million still-legal single-shot models, rapid-fire guns – the declared target of Australia's gun control measures – are now very difficult to obtain.

However, it seems inconceivable that a public safety measure on this scale might occur any time soon in the United States. Australia's gun buybacks amounted to confiscation of private property, albeit fairly compensated, under the threat of jail time. In the United States, destroying an equivalent one-third of the country's civilian firearms would require sending 90 million weapons to the smelter. Further, an attitude adjustment would be required. Australians are almost universally proud of what they achieved, and police have become more focused while politicians remain determined to prevent gun violence. Two decades since Port Arthur, Australia's conservative government maintains its gun control momentum. Over recent months, another 57,324 firearms were surrendered in a single, uncompensated [national gun amnesty](#).

Another stark contrast between the two countries is that while the US Congress systematically [avoids research](#) into gun control, Australian federal agencies seek out the evidence they need to develop effective public policy. Studies now show that since compulsory registration was introduced, making every Australian gun owner personally accountable for each firearm in their possession, safe storage improved and [gun thefts from licensed owners dropped by 50%](#). Following the confiscation and destruction of semi-automatic rifles and shotguns, [illegal handguns](#), long the weapon of choice for criminals, have become Australia's most pressing problem in armed violence. One extensive government study estimated the extent of [illicit gun ownership](#) at 260,000 firearms still loose in a population of 25 million, while the Australian Institute of Criminology examined [gun trafficking](#) and the methods used by organised crime gangs. Without similar evidence, it's hard to see how any government in the United States, state or federal, can make informed policy decisions.

None of what Australia achieved promises to be the single solution, and few of the country's gun policy decisions could be transplanted to other nations without encountering deep opposition and pain. Yet Americans already possess the tools needed to do what they've always done – to lead the world in tackling urgent epidemics with proven, evidence-based public health measures.

As nations around the world continue to grapple with armed violence, citizens deserve answers to the questions posed so urgently in recent weeks. Surely, the change demanded is inevitable. America, a society with such admirable skills and resources, must eventually fend off the special interest groups and politicians who currently block professionals with the proven skill to save lives, then start to reduce the damage mass shootings wreak on its social fabric.

Sadly, without this reversal in American public policy there seems only the hope implied in Stein's Law: "If something cannot go on forever, it will stop."

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