

FIREARM REGULATION IN AUSTRALIA: INSIGHTS FROM INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE AND RESEARCH

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I. Development of Firearm Regulation in Australia

1. Pre-1996 Context

A. Firearm Ownership and Firearm Violence

Australia's relationship with firearms before the 1990s could be described as permissive and accepted. Despite a high degree of urbanisation, the notion of the Outback (with its associated gun ownership) loomed large in the popular imagination. Data were scarce due to poor record-keeping, but in 1988, when the country's population was sixteen million, it was estimated that one quarter of households contained a gun; the total civilian arsenal was estimated at 3.5–3.75 million firearms, or one gun for every four people, having risen from one gun for every five or six people over the previous decade (Chappell et al., 1988). The weapons were mostly rifles and shotguns, with only about 5% being handguns (Harding, 1988). In contrast, handguns constituted about one third of the US arsenal in the 1990s (Alpers, Picard, & Pavesi, 2022b). The overwhelming majority of firearms in Australia were imported, as local manufacturing for civilian use was almost non-existent (Australia, 2018: 26).

Rates of death by firearm in Australia tended to be slightly higher than in most European countries but only a fraction of US rates (Alpers, Picard, & Pavesi, 2022c; Alpers, Picard, & Pavesi, 2022d). At least 75% of gun deaths were suicides (Kreisfield, 2006). Guns were the most common method of suicide and of homicide (Chappell et al., 1988) and especially common in domestic killings (Wallace, 1986; Condie, 1988; Neal, 1988). Mass shootings occurred about once a year (Alpers & Ghazarian, 2019).

B. Firearm Regulation

Before 1996, Australia regulated firearms more strictly than the United States but not as strictly as other democracies such as Japan, Canada, and some European countries (Swain, 1996). As in the United States, gun laws varied across the country because gun control was primarily a matter for the states and territories. The federal government's involvement was limited to regulating imports and exports, although the National Committee on Violence had recommended a federal role in regulating gun sales within Australia (see discussion below). According to Reg 2c of the Customs (Prohibited Imports) Regulations 1956, all firearms were permitted for importation except automatic or semi-automatic rifles and shotguns suitable for use with detachable magazines that held more than five

rounds, those ‘designed or adapted for military purposes’, and guns capable of being fired with the stock folded or removed.

The national regulatory patchwork encompassed wide variations among the eight Australian states and territories (Peters, 1996). Fully automatic weapons were banned in Western Australia, the Northern Territory, and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) but permitted for collectors and/or film productions in the other states. Victoria required a special permit for semi-automatic centrefire (but not rimfire) rifles; Western Australia banned all centrefire weapons with detachable magazines; and Tasmania and Queensland made no regulatory distinction between single-shot .22 rifles and semi-automatic assault weapons. Some states required all guns to be registered, while others did not. All jurisdictions required a licence for purchase of firearms, but the screening process also varied, so a person barred from owning guns in one state could legally own them in another. For example, New South Wales (NSW) prohibited guns for anyone with a domestic violence restraining order in the previous ten years; but in Tasmania and Western Australia, even a current restraining order was only a ‘relevant factor’ to take into account. Some jurisdictions required licence applicants to prove their reason for having a gun (sport, hunting, agriculture), while others did not. As the federal government later admitted, the patchwork approach also led to diversion of firearms to the illicit market, ‘facilitated to an extent by loopholes in legislation and regulation, lack of oversight, and low penalties that were applied to firearm offences’ (Australian Government Attorney General’s Department, 2014: 3).

One element was consistent across the nation: relatively strict regulation of handguns. All jurisdictions limited these weapons to pistol club members and security guards, and all required the ownership and transfer of handguns to be registered with the police. Personal self-defence was not a legal reason for gun ownership; the only civilians allowed to carry loaded weapons were security guards.¹ In this regard, Australia was similar to European nations and Canada – and different from the United States, where, by 1997, 31 of 50 states required local law enforcement ‘to issue permits to carry concealed handguns to any adult applicant who [did] not have a felony conviction or a history of serious mental illness’ (Webster & Ludwig, 2000: 2) This restrictive approach accounted for Australia’s low level of handgun possession and helped to contain firearm mortality compared to the United States (Polk & Ransom, 1991).

¹ In most jurisdictions, self-defence was simply not included in the list of legal reasons; but South Australia and NSW explicitly disallowed this reason in their laws, according to the Firearms Regulation 1990 and Reg 12 of the Firearms Regulations 1993.

C. Pressure for Reform

Since the early 1980s, concern about weak gun laws had been mounting in the Australian public health, women's rights, and legal communities. Each high-profile shooting produced a burst of media coverage and public outrage, followed sometimes by an inquiry or expert review and occasionally by legislative amendments in individual states.² Recommendations for reform in the wake of such tragedies had been made by at least twelve expert bodies.³ The most comprehensive review was conducted by the National Committee on Violence (NCV), established in 1989 after two mass shootings in Victoria (National Committee on Violence, 1990). The NCV examined all aspects and types of violence, direct and indirect contributing factors, victim support, as well as strategies for response and prevention. Over the course of a year, it held hearings around the country and received over 400 written submissions. Its 138 recommendations included about twenty related to firearm regulation. The NCV called for national uniform gun laws, uniform guidelines for enforcement, and the development of a national gun control strategy aimed at (a) reducing the number of firearms in Australia and (b) preventing access to firearms by individuals who were not 'fit and proper persons' (NCV, 1990). Some of the NCV recommendations were incorporated in amendments to the NSW Firearms Act in 1992, including seizure of guns from domestic violence offenders, safe storage requirements, and stricter licence conditions for owners of semi-automatic rifles. However, the most critical recommendations for national uniform laws with a national firearm registration system were not taken up by the states and territories – a fact lamented by the NCV director after the Port Arthur massacre several years later ('Beyond Gun Laws', 1996).

A grassroots campaign for gun law reform also gathered momentum from the mid-1980s. Australians who thought gun violence was a US problem were shocked as each shooting tragedy revealed glaring policy defects. They took to the streets in protest (see Voumard, 1991; Macey, 1996).

² For example, after the Strathfield shopping centre massacre in Sydney, the state parliament conducted an inquiry, eventually resulting in changes under the Firearms Legislation (Amendment) Act 1992 (Garcia, 1991; Moore & Clarke 1991). The most important changes were obligatory seizure of firearms and suspension of licences held by domestic violence offenders; a separate category of licence for self-loading centre-fire rifles and semi-automatic shotguns, with the requirement to provide a genuine reason; permitting ammunition sales only to firearm licence holders; safe storage requirements; and incorporation of a photo on gun licences. In addition, personal protection was explicitly excluded as a reason for possessing firearms. The changes did not include requiring registration or proof of reason for firearms generally.

³ Women's Policy Co-ordination Unit (1985); Australian Law Reform Commission (1986); Task Force on Domestic Violence (WA) (1986); Queensland Domestic Violence Task Force (1988); Social Development Committee (Parliament of Victoria) (1988); National Committee on Violence (1990); Joint Select Committee upon Gun Law Reform (NSW Parliament) (1991); Law Reform Commission of Victoria (1991); NSW Domestic Violence Committee (1991a); NSW Domestic Violence Committee (1991b); NSW Domestic Violence Committee (1991c); National Committee on Violence against Women (1993).

Community and professional organisations adopted policy positions, lobbied politicians, made submissions to review committees and inquiries.⁴ Their reform agenda was based on public health principles of prevention and on the recommendations from the NCV and the other reviews (Peters & Chapman, 1995).

By the mid-1990s the National Coalition for Gun Control (NCGC) brought together over 300 organisations, including public health and medical societies, women's groups, legal and human rights bodies, mental health groups, rural organisations, churches, trade unions, and associations of senior citizens, parents, young people, and crime victims. Participants ranged across the political spectrum, from the Country Women's Association to the Council for Civil Liberties, from the War Widows' Guild to the Gay & Lesbian Anti Violence Project. This diversity reflected the multiplicity of dangers that guns pose in society: some campaign members were especially concerned about domestic violence, others about crime on the streets, youth suicide, or occupational risks for police and bank tellers. Their common conviction was that guns are by design inherently dangerous products, the availability of which should be strictly regulated in the interests of public health and safety (Peters, 1998).

The breadth of the coalition also reflected the status of gun law reform as a mainstream concern rather than the preserve of a single-issue lobby group. Opinion polls had long indicated that the overwhelming majority of Australians believed the country should have tough uniform gun laws (Chapman, 2013; Norberry, Woolner, & Magarey, 1996). Yet the issue was often framed by the media as a tug-of-war between gun control activists and the pro-gun lobby.⁵ The latter was not as powerful as its US counterpart, lacking the financial base of a firearm manufacturing sector. However, Australian parliamentary elections are often determined by the results in districts where the electoral margins are slim (Wanna, 2022). While surveys showed that most gun owners did not oppose tighter gun laws, the gun lobby relied on a small but very energetic group who claimed to vote solely or largely on this issue. For years, they had succeeded in blocking proposed reforms by threatening to organise local campaigns against parliamentarians in marginal seats (see, e.g., Cockburn 1996; Davidson 1996; and

⁴ For example, over 250 submissions were made to the NSW Parliament's Joint Select Committee upon Gun Law Reform (Lagan, 1991), while some 180 submissions were made to the coroner's inquiry into the shooting of two police on a domestic violence call at Crescent Head, NSW (Lagan, 1995).

⁵ See, for example, the televised debate in 1992 on Channel 9's *A Current Affair* between Robert Corbin of the US National Rifle Association and Simon Chapman of the NSW Coalition for Gun Control (as cited in Chapman, 2016b); and the one in 1996 on Channel 7's *Today Tonight* between Ian McNiven of Gun Owners of Australia and Rebecca Peters of the National Coalition for Gun Control (as cited in Chapman, 2016a). In both cases, the pro-gun speakers articulated extreme views that focused on guns for self-defence, a particularly 'fringe' aspect of the issue in Australia.

Chapman 2013). Thus, despite legislators from both major political parties acknowledging the need for comprehensive reform, neither party was prepared to make the first move publicly (Chapman, 2013: 62–63). The topic was raised repeatedly at meetings of the Australasian Police Ministers' Council (APMC), but police ministers are also members of parliament and therefore concerned about elections. Campaigners had attempted to persuade the two major political parties to move simultaneously toward tighter laws, but the highly adversarial nature of Australian politics had prevented this shift from occurring.

2. The Port Arthur Massacre

The turning point for firearm regulation in Australia occurred on 28 April 1996, when a young man with no recorded history of mental illness or crime, armed with semi-automatic weapons, killed 35 people at one of Australia's most popular tourist destinations, the Port Arthur historic site in the island state of Tasmania. Nineteen other people were seriously injured in the attack. The guns used were legally available in Tasmania but banned in most other states; in fact, Tasmania had the country's weakest gun law (Peters, 1996). It was a devastating demonstration of the need for national uniform regulation. Most of the victims were tourists visiting from other states with stronger laws; it had probably not crossed their minds that travelling within the country on holiday would mean forgoing protection from rapid-fire weaponry.

At the time, the Port Arthur deaths constituted the second largest massacre by a single shooter ever recorded globally.⁶ It ignited an explosion of public sorrow and outrage, as the nation demanded overhaul of the gun laws.⁷ The Prime Minister summoned the Australasian Police Ministers' Council and proposed a plan for strict uniform gun laws to be enacted across the country. Twelve days after the massacre, the Police Ministers agreed that all jurisdictions would adopt the National Firearms Agreement (NFA) (Australasian Police Ministers' Council, 1996). The NFA, which will be examined further below, included most of the measures recommended by the previous inquiries and therefore most of the reform agenda promoted by the NCGC. The adoption of the NFA was followed by more

⁶ The deadliest massacre occurred on 26 April 1982 in Uiryeong County, South Korea, when a police officer shot and killed 62 people and injured 33 others, across several villages before committing suicide. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woo_Bum-kon

⁷ For examples of the many news stories on the topic, see Montgomery & Gordon (1996); Steketee (1996); Chan & Gordon (1996); Farr (1996); Milliken 1996; 'Wanted Now: A National Ban on Deadly Guns' (1996); 'Australians Call for Tough Gun Laws after Massacre' (1996).

than a year of intense lobbying and argument over detail, as state and territory parliaments translated the agreement into legislation.

Box 1: Voters in Western Australia Affirm Public Support for the NFA

In December 1996, the National Firearms Agreement faced its first test at the ballot box. In the Western Australia state election, the uniform national gun control measures, which had been agreed 3,000 km away in Canberra, were hotly contested within the state's ruling party. Although its Police Minister had signed the agreement, the Canberra consensus was opposed by the leaders of both his own party and its coalition partner, one of whom was the state Premier. Independently of the grassroots movement then dominating debate and support for gun control in central and eastern states, the local branch of the Australian Medical Association and the newly formed Coalition for Gun Control successfully countered the widespread local and mainly rural opposition on the West Coast to the national agreement. Following months of public pressure, the ruling coalition state government was returned to power, but only after reversing its opposition to gun law reform (Anthony, 1996; Agence France Presse, 1996). More than 25 years later in 2022, faced with significant increases in private gun ownership, the most recent Labor government of Western Australia announced a 'complete rewrite' of the state's gun laws, which were, in the opinion of the Police Minister, too permissive (Law, 2022).

3. Policy Responses

A. The National Firearms Agreement

The NFA sets minimum standards for all states and territories to regulate the import, sale, purchase, possession, and use of firearms. The most important elements are a ban on self-loading rifles and shotguns, registration of all firearms, and more stringent licensing procedures, including the obligation to prove a 'genuine reason' for possessing a gun, as laid out in Resolution 3 of the Agreement.

When it comes to proving a 'genuine reason', personal protection is specifically ruled out. This did not mark a major substantive change but rather made explicit an implied norm, since (as mentioned earlier) personal protection and self-defence were not among the acceptable reasons for a gun licence even pre-NFA. However, not all jurisdictions had previously required applicants to prove a reason, and research had shown that 'fear of crime' was the motivation underlying weapons acquisition for up to one third of gun owners (Chappell et al., 1988).

The National Firearms Agreement is summarised in **Table I.1**. The NFA contains eleven resolutions: ten core measures to incorporate into state and territory legislation, plus a one-off amnesty with compensation (a 'buyback') to encourage owners to surrender newly prohibited self-loading weapons. Most planks of the Agreement were already in the gun laws of at least one Australian jurisdiction, but the new scheme was more robust and coherent than any of the existing laws.

Table I.1: A Brief Summary of Key Parts of the National Firearms Agreement (1996)

<p>1. Ban on automatic and semi-automatic long arms</p> <p>Ban on import (by Federal Government), sale, resale, transfer, ownership, possession, manufacture, and use</p>
<p>2. Registration of all firearms</p> <p>Integration of licensing and registration systems across the country</p>
<p>3. Licence applicants must prove ‘genuine reason’ for every firearm they wish to possess</p> <p>Exclusion of personal protection as a genuine reason; applications for Category B, C, D and H licences (see below) also require proof of ‘genuine need’</p>
<p>4. Uniform minimum licence requirements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimum age (18 years), proof of genuine reason, be a ‘fit and proper person’, safety test, waiting period of at least 28 days • Photo licence showing the holder’s address and the category of firearm, valid for a maximum of five years before requiring renewal • Storage requirements, inspection by police, licence withdrawal and seizure of guns in certain circumstances • Categories of licences and firearms: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> air rifles; rimfire rifles (excluding self-loading); single- and double-barrel shotguns muzzle-loading firearms; single-shot, double-barrel and repeating centrefire rifles; break-action shotgun/rifle combinations (prohibited except for certain occupational purposes, later expanded to include some clay target shooters): semi-automatic rimfire rifles with maximum 10-round magazine; semi-automatic shotguns with maximum 5-round magazine; pump action shotguns with maximum 5-round magazine (prohibited except for official purposes): semi-automatic centrefire rifles; semi-automatic shotguns; pump-action shotguns with a capacity over five rounds; semi-automatic rimfire rifles with capacity over ten rounds all handguns, including air pistols
<p>5. Prerequisite safety training before licensing</p> <p>Accredited course for first-time licence; specialised course for security industry employees</p>
<p>6. Grounds for licence refusal / cancellation and seizure of firearms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General reasons: not of good character, conviction for violence in past five years, contravention of gun law, unsafe storage, no longer having genuine reason, failure to notify of change of address, licence obtained by deception, not in the public interest • Specific reasons: restraining order or serious assault conviction in past five years • Mental or physical fitness: reliable evidence of a condition that would make applicant unsuitable to possess a gun
<p>7. Permit to acquire</p> <p>Separate permits required for the acquisition of every firearm, with a waiting period of at least 28 days</p>

8. Uniform standard for the security and storage of firearms

- Guns must be kept locked, ammunition stored separately; failure to store firearms safely is an offence
- Specific storage requirements for different categories of firearms
- Additional rules for safekeeping of firearms when temporarily away from the usual place of storage

9. Recording of sales

- No private or backyard sales: all sales to be conducted by or through licensed firearm dealers
- Dealers must ensure purchaser is licensed and provide details of each purchase and sale to firearm registry
- Ammunition sold only for guns for which the purchaser is licensed; limits on the quantity that can be purchased

10. No mail-order sales

- Mail order only allowed from licensed gun dealers to licensed gun dealers
- Advertisements conducted only by or through licensed gun dealers

11. Buyback and destruction of self-loading weapons

- Fair and proper compensation, based on the value of each firearm as at March 1996
- twelve-month amnesty to surrender banned weapons

The key components of a gun control regime are not discrete but interdependent. Owner licensing is intended to ensure that guns are in the hands of only appropriately qualified individuals; but it cannot fulfil this function unless it is supported by firearm registration. Registration in turn is flawed if the law allows for a buyer to take possession of the gun before registering it, as is the case in some countries when a car is sold. The NFA contains two measures to close the circle of accountability: a pre-purchase permit to acquire, which initiates and gives notice of the process of a firearm changing hands; and a ban on private sales. All gun transfers must go through licensed firearm dealers, who thus become part of the enforcement machinery. Dealers have a strong incentive to ensure compliance with the law, since their own licences and livelihood are on the line if they provide a weapon to someone not appropriately licensed or for whom a permit to purchase has not been approved. Another section of the firearm-owning community was also incorporated into the new regulatory scheme: police-approved shooting clubs are the providers of safety training required for obtaining a gun licence. Many of the shooting organisations were originally opposed to the NFA (Hills, 1996; Tidswell, 1996), but over the years they have benefited financially from the fees for compulsory membership (Alpers, 2016).

Further notable provisions in the NFA include regulation of ammunition, safe storage requirements, and a five-year ban for domestic violence offenders. The primacy of public safety is recognised by other grounds for licence refusal and cancellation that allow for discretion and common

sense: if the individual is ‘not of good character’, if a mental or physical condition makes them unsuitable, or if their possession of firearms is ‘not in the public interest’. The latter principle has been invoked, for example, in cases where possession of firearms could enable access to weapons by another household member who would be disqualified from holding a licence in their own name (Reuter & Mouzos, 2003).⁸

Box 2: Firearm Possession as a Conditional Privilege

One topic of intense public discussion after Port Arthur was the status of gun ownership in Australia as a privilege rather than a right (Howard, 1996). The new laws subsequently adopted by most of the states and territories included variations of an explicit declaration that possession of guns is a privilege.⁹ This statement was subsequently confirmed by the High Court of Australia.¹⁰ When the NFA was updated in 2017 to incorporate additional norms agreed among the jurisdictions over two decades, its opening paragraph affirmed that ‘firearms possession and use is a privilege that is conditional on the overriding need to ensure public safety’ (Council of Australian Governments, 2017). This marks a fundamental difference from gun discourse in the United States.

B. The Buyback of Prohibited Weapons

Point 11 in the NFA was a buyback program to remove the newly prohibited arms from circulation. During a year-long amnesty, self-loading rifles, shotguns, and parts could be surrendered to police for compensation and destruction (Australian National Audit Office (ANAO), 1997). This was the aspect of the reforms that attracted most international media interest, generating dramatic images of huge piles of surrendered firearms bound for the smelters (Brazil & Berry, 1997; Sullivan, 1997). The first federal gun buyback program (1996–97) became the world’s largest civilian firearm collection system, with an official tally of 659,940 weapons handed in (Reuter & Mouzos, 2003).

The main buyback was funded by the federal government but run by the states and territories, leading to some variation in implementation. To prevent guns from moving around the country in

⁸ The courts have upheld the denial of licences or the imposition of a Firearms Prohibition Order on the basis of ‘public interest’ in cases such as: when the applicant’s son was at serious risk of suicide (*Emery v Commissioner of Police* [2022] NSWCATAD 122); when the applicant had a clean record but belonged to a motorcycle gang known to have criminal connections (*Savage v Registrar of Firearms* [2021] SASC 144); and when the applicant was married to a man who had been prohibited from possessing firearms (*Philp v Commissioner of Police, NSW Police Force* [2014] NSWCATAD 25).

⁹ The NSW and ACT laws “confirm firearm possession and use as being a privilege that is conditional on the overriding need to ensure public safety” according to s. 3 of *Firearms Act 1996* (NSW) and s. 5 of *Firearms Act 1996* (ACT). Very similar wording appears in South Australia’s *Firearms Act 2015* (SA) in s. 3. In Victoria, “the possession, carriage, use, acquisition and disposal of firearms are conditional on the need to ensure public safety and peace” from s. 1 of *Firearms Act 1996* (Vic.). In Queensland, “weapon possession and use are subordinate to the need to ensure public and individual safety” according to s. 3 of *Weapons Act 1990*.

¹⁰ Mr Essenberg had claimed a right to own firearms under the English Bill of Rights of 1688, guaranteeing the right of Protestants to have arms for self-defence (*Essenberg v. The Queen*, 2000; *Essenberg v. The Queen*, 2002).

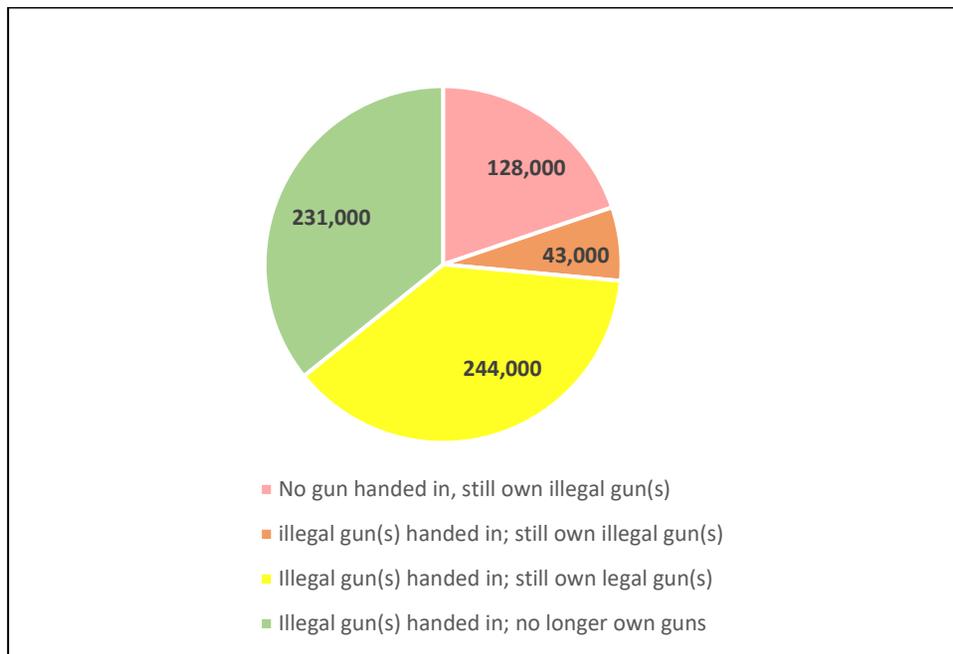
search of higher payment, fair rates of compensation for each type and model were compiled in a national uniform schedule (ANAO, 1997). Compensation was paid for all newly banned weapons, whether legally owned or not, including dealer stocks of weapons and components. Dealers were asked to hand in their stocks immediately in return for compensation at their published retail prices of 1 March 1996. This halted the sale of prohibited weapons across the country, even before each parliament had changed its laws. According to ANAO (1997), in some jurisdictions, compensation was also provided for fully automatic weapons that were already prohibited before 1996. Non-self-loading firearms could also be handed in under the amnesty, but compensation was not paid for these. Dealers could apply for additional compensation for the loss of business they expected to suffer as a result of the new laws. A survey conducted by the main shooters' group found that most participants were satisfied with the amount of compensation received (ANAO, 1997).

To fund the buyback, the national health insurance levy was increased by 0.2% for one year, raising about AU\$500 million (US\$391 or CA\$468 million in 1997). At the beginning, it was unknown whether this would be sufficient, since no reliable estimate could be made of the number of self-loading weapons in the country. In the end, about 80% of the funds raised, or AU\$398 million (US\$311/CA\$372.5 million) was spent on compensation payments; with AU\$63 million (\$US49/CA\$59 million) going to administration costs, including upgrading police computer capacity across the country to operate the new and enhanced licensing and registration systems (Attorney General's Department, 2006a; ANAO 1997). A further AU\$4 million (US\$3/CA\$3.7 million) went to public education on the reforms, while AU\$1.5 million (US\$1.2/CA\$1.4 million) was put toward firearm training programs (Attorney General's Department, 2006b). The remainder of the funds were applied toward a second buyback in 2002–03, which accompanied additional regulatory reform on handguns (Johns, 2004); the federal handgun buyback removed from circulation some 69,000 weapons, plus 278,000 parts and accessories, for compensation of AU\$97 million (US\$75/CA\$90.4 million) (Attorney General's Department, 2006b).

The audit conducted immediately after the main 1996–97 buyback noted that opportunities were missed to collect useful information (ANAO, 1997). For example, if states had been required to record the details of each weapon destroyed, the data could have been compared against existing records of firearm ownership, sales, and imports. This would have improved the quality and accuracy of the national data set and of estimates regarding the size and composition of the legal and illegal stockpiles.

A telephone survey commissioned by the federal government about three quarters of the way through the buyback sought to fill in some of the knowledge gap (ANAO, 1997). The findings indicated that about 14% of households contained guns, a figure much lower than previously believed. The survey results extrapolated to the population suggested that before the buyback, some 646,000 people (estimated to be 45% of all gun owners) had owned firearms that subsequently became prohibited. At the time of the survey, 74% of those owners (equivalent to 475,000 people) had handed in all their illegal weapons for compensation; a further 7% (43,000 people) had handed in some but not all their illegal guns; while 20% (128,000 people) had not handed in any. (See **Figure I.1.**) The results of the telephone survey when extrapolated to the population suggested that of the 171,000 people who still retained illegal guns, 84% said they were likely to hand them in during the time remaining in the buyback period. The survey thus suggested that up to 96% of the owners of illegal guns either complied or intended to comply with the buyback.

Figure I.1. Owners of Illegal Guns during the Buyback Program in 1997



Source: Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) Performance Audit (18 December 1997), p. 33

After the buyback, the number of guns in the country was estimated at 2.5 million (Reuter & Mouzos, 2003). The national stockpile before the buyback would thus have been around 3.2 million – meaning that one in every five guns was eliminated by the first buyback alone (Reuter & Mouzos, 2003; Chappell et al., 1988).

C. Subsequent Reforms

Six years after the adoption of the National Firearms Agreement, two more national agreements developed by the APMC were incorporated into federal, state, and territory laws. The National Firearms Trafficking Policy Agreement 2002 addressed trafficking with measures to strengthen customs capacity, tighten the regulation of dealers, improve reporting, and introduce specific offences related to illegal manufacturing, trafficking, defacing serial numbers, and falsifying records (APMC Firearms Policy Working Group, 2002). Penalties for firearm offences were also increased. Meanwhile the National Handgun Agreement 2002 restricted the classes of handguns that can be imported or possessed and tightened the rules applying to handgun licence-holders and shooting clubs (APMC, 2002). The Agreement provided for another buyback program in 2003, this time limited to handguns; an additional 68,727 pistols and revolvers were collected and destroyed (Hudson, 2004).

There followed 26 uncompensated firearm amnesties conducted by the country's eight states and territories (Alpers & Rossetti, 2016). In these, tens of thousands of gun owners voluntarily surrendered additional nonprohibited firearms without compensation (Alpers & Ghazarian, 2019). By 2015, at least 1,038,089 privately owned firearms – one third of the estimated national stockpile – are known to have been seized or surrendered and then destroyed (Chapman et al., 2018). The effort to curb the proliferation of firearms is ongoing, with another amnesty in 2017 yielding an additional 57,324 weapons for destruction or registration (National Firearms and Weapons Policy Working Group, 2017). In July 2021, the Federal Government announced a 'permanent national firearms amnesty' allowing unregistered or unwanted firearms to be handed in anonymously and without penalty to police or licensed firearms dealers (Australian Department of Home Affairs, 2021). Meanwhile, the number of guns in Australia has risen again with the importation of over 1.5 million mainly single-shot replacement weapons since 1996 (Alpers & Picard, 2021).¹¹

Since 2014, additional policy adjustments have been made at state and territory level: for example, in 2021, Victoria enacted the Firearms and Other Acts Amendment Act 2021 to specify detailed gun storage standards, limit the loan of a firearm by a licensed dealer to 30 days, and clarify what constitutes evidence of identity for dealer licence applicants. Developments at Federal level have

¹¹ In 2017, Australia was the world's seventh major importer of small arms, while Canada was ranked third (Florquin, Hainard, & Jongleux, 2020: Annex A2).

included extensive elaboration of the rules to prevent firearm trafficking,¹² as well as improvements in record-keeping and information-sharing, police capacity-building, and firearm tracing. The Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, a federal agency, supports the state and territory government with the Australian Ballistic Information Network, Australian Firearms Information Network, National Firearms Identification Database and the National Firearm Trace Program (ACIC, 2021). These technical improvements play an essential role in delivering the broader promise of firearm policy reform.

Since the Port Arthur tragedy, Australia has had eight federal governments (six Conservative and two Labor),¹³ while the eight states and territories have replaced or renewed their governments dozens of times. There have been occasional backward steps,¹⁴ and loopholes have come to light, especially in enforcement.¹⁵ However, the overall framework of the National Firearms Agreement has proved workable and durable over a quarter of a century.

¹² Customs (Prohibited Imports) Amendment (Firearms and Weapons) Regulations 2021; Customs (Prohibited Imports) Amendment (Firearms) Regulations 2020; Customs (Prohibited Imports) Amendment (Shotguns and Shotgun Magazines) Regulation 2016; Customs (Prohibited Imports) Amendment (Firearms and Other Weapons) Regulation 2015; Customs (Prohibited Imports) Amendment (Firearms and Firearm Magazines) Regulation 2015.

¹³ Another Labor government was elected on 21 May 2022 (Basford Canales, Dingwall, & Neale, 2022).

¹⁴ For example, in 2008, the NSW Parliament eliminated the 28-day waiting period for every gun purchase, requiring it only for the first firearm of a particular class (Firearms Amendment Act 2008).

¹⁵ For example, John Edwards was granted a handgun licence despite a history of domestic violence and went on to kill his children and himself (McKinnell, 2021). The NSW Police subsequently overhauled the firearm registry's computer system and began looking for other potential licensing errors (Fife Yeomans, 2022).

II. Impact Assessment after 25 Years

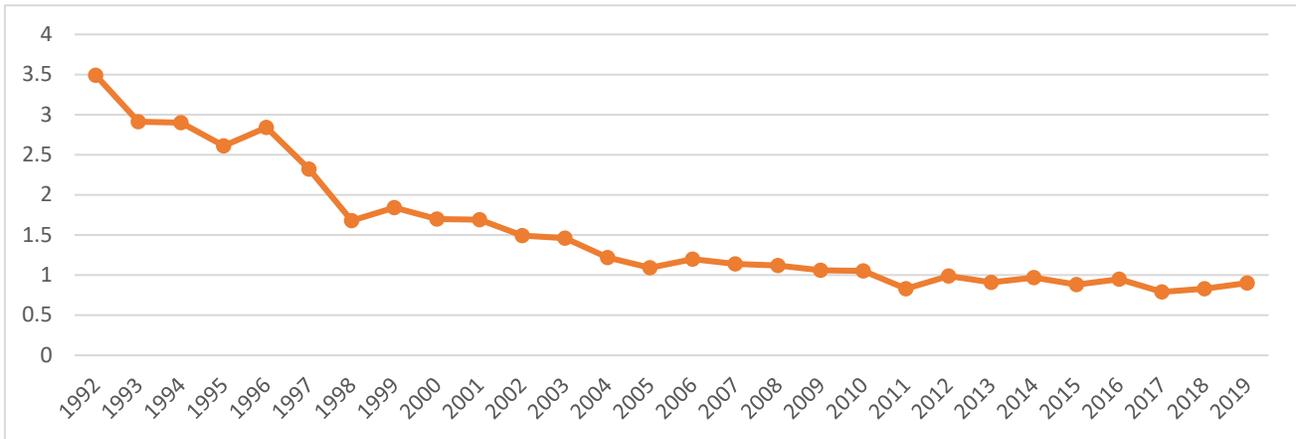
1. What Has Been Achieved?

The policy changes outlined in the previous section have had a substantial and positive effect on gun violence in Australia. From 1979, leading up to and including the 1996 Port Arthur massacre and before gun law reforms, there were thirteen mass shootings in the country (Chapman, Alpers, & Jones, 2016).¹⁶ In the twenty-two years that followed to April 2018, there were no such incidents (Chapman, Alpers, & Jones, 2016; Alpers, 2022). The number one resolution of Australia's gun law reforms (Australasian Police Ministers' Council, 1996: 1) – namely to remove from civilian possession the rapid-fire weapons shown to be most dangerous in mass shootings – was followed by an immediate, dramatic, and long-term reduction in firearm-related mass killings.

Positive results were also observed in much broader categories of gun death. Between 1979 and 1996, average annual firearm-related mortality was 3.6 per 100,000 people; after the National Firearms Agreement, it dropped to 1.2 per 100,000 people between 1997 and 2013 (Chapman, Alpers, & Jones, 2016). Firearm-related mortality had already been falling in Australia, but changes in the rate of firearm-related death accelerated from an average decrease of 3% per year before gun laws were upgraded to an average decrease of 4.9% per year afterward (Chapman et al., 2006). (See **Figure II.1** and **Figure II.2**.) There were sizable reductions in firearm-related suicides and homicides. The most noticeable drop after gun law reform was in firearm-related suicides, which currently account for about 70% of gun deaths in Australia (Negin, Alpers et al., 2021; Negin, Bell et al., 2021), with no evidence of substitution in methods of suicide (Chapman, Alpers, & Jones, 2016). Globally, Australia had one of the largest annual rates of change in the number of firearm-related deaths between 1990 and 2016 (Naghavi et al., 2018).

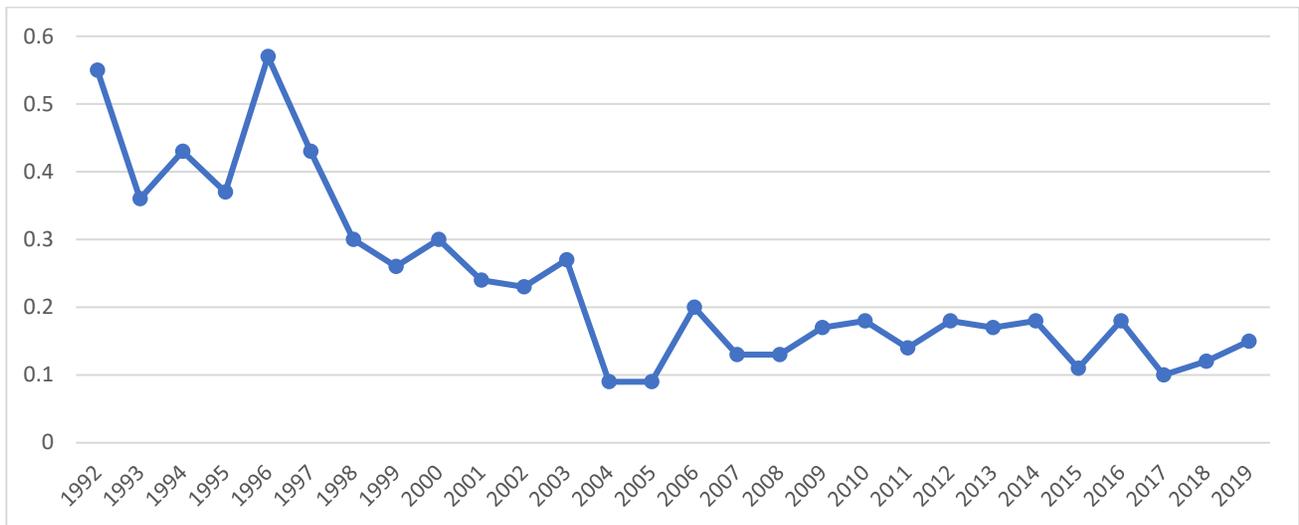
¹⁶ A mass shooting is defined here (in line with previous research) as five or more victims, not including the perpetrator, who are killed by gunshot (see Chapman, Alpers, & Jones, 2016: Table 1 footnote; Chapman et al., 2006).

Figure II.1. Rate of Gun Deaths in Australia per 100,000 People, 1993–2019



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Causes of Death, Australia, 2019* (2020), compiled at GunPolicy.org (2022)

Figure II.2. Rate of Gun-Related Homicide Deaths in Australia per 100,000 People, 1992–2019



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Causes of Death, Australia, 2019* (2020), compiled at GunPolicy.org (2022)

It is important to note that the number of non-firearm suicides and homicides has also fallen during the past quarter-century in Australia. Reductions in gun deaths overall, however, have been much more substantial. Between 1997 and 2013, there was a 55% reduction in the firearm-related suicide rate (as compared with a 16% reduction in the non-firearm suicide rate) and a 62% reduction in the firearm-related homicide rate (as compared with a 44% reduction in the non-firearm homicide rate).¹⁷

¹⁷ These data points are from David Hemenway’s independent analysis of data contained in Chapman, Alpers, et al., 2016.

A rare-events model has provided strong evidence that the absence of mass shootings in Australia between 1997 and 2017 was not merely a continuation of a pre-existing pattern (Chapman et al., 2018). No policy other than the sweeping national revision of gun legislation has been suggested to explain the large reduction in firearm-related mortality.

Studies have found that a country's estimated rate of firearm ownership is associated with its rates of firearm-related suicide and homicide.¹⁸ As compared with the United States, Australia has fewer guns per capita, stronger gun regulations, and far lower firearm-related mortality. The effect of gun availability on violent death is substantial. For example, an international meta-analysis of intimate partner violence perpetrated by men found that having access to a gun was linked to a more than tenfold increase in the likelihood of killing a partner, as opposed to committing nonfatal violence (Spencer & Stith, 2020).

Recent data from Australia's most populous state, New South Wales, includes non-fatal firearm-related injuries in addition to the mortality data outlined above (Negin, Bell, et al., 2021). Over the period of 2002 to 2016 for which data was available, the overall firearm-related injury rate in New South Wales declined from 3.4 per 100,000 population to 1.8 per 100,000, primarily due to declines in injuries caused by assaults and accidents. The rate of self-harm injuries with firearms remained relatively stable. Analysis has found that assault injuries were more common among younger urban men, while suicides were more common among older men living in rural and remote communities (Negin, Bell, et al., 2021).

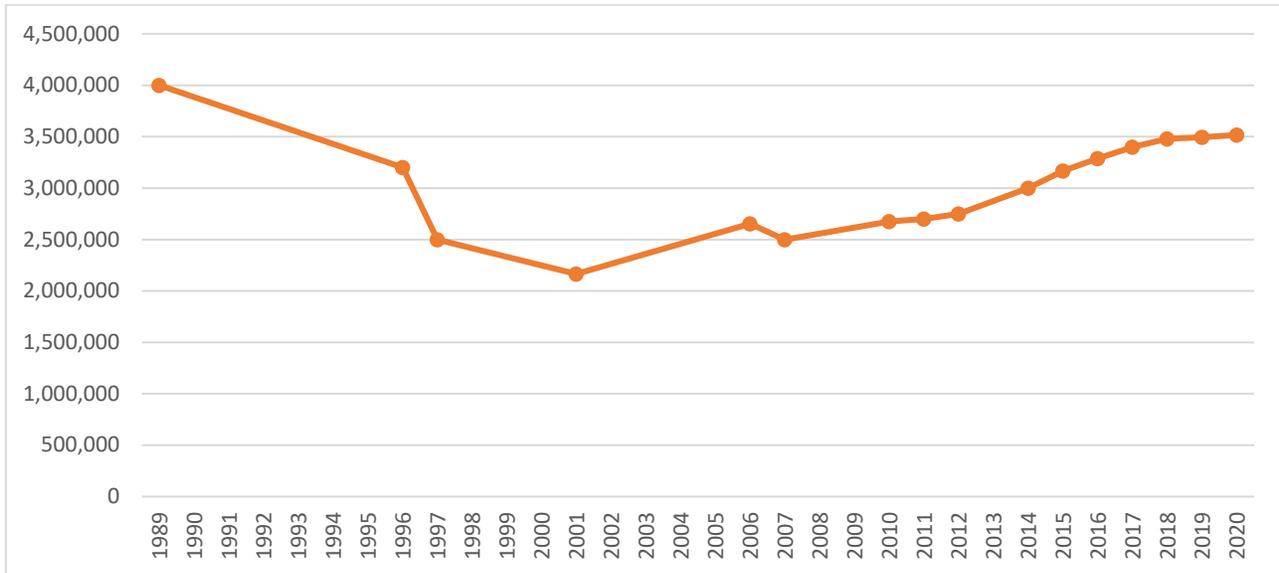
These reductions in fatal and non-fatal injuries by firearm have been achieved despite the overall number of guns increasing since 1996. One fifth of the national arsenal was destroyed in the initial buyback, but imports of mainly single-shot firearms over subsequent years more than replaced this numerical reduction.¹⁹ The number of registered firearms in Australia now exceeds 3.5 million – a 62% increase since 2001 and 10% higher than the estimated stockpile before Port Arthur (**Figure II.3**). However, this does not translate into a higher rate of gun ownership in Australian society because that larger number of weapons is concentrated in fewer hands: in 2020, the number of licensed firearm owners was around 868,000, one third less than the estimated 1.2 million in 1996 (Alpers, Lovell, & Picard, 2022). Each owner now possesses around four guns on average, compared with three in 1996. With population growth, licensed gun owners now constitute 3.4% of the population, down from 6.5%

¹⁸ See, for example, Anestis & Houtsma (2018); Hemenway, Shinoda-Tagawa, & Miller (2002); Miller, Azrael, & Hemenway (2002); Killias (1993).

¹⁹ From 1996 to 2020, Australians imported 1,475,859 guns (Alpers & Picard, 2021).

in 1996. Despite the dramatic fall in gun ownership, Australia's sport-shooting community remains vibrant (Negin, Alpers et al., 2021), and groups such as farmers use firearms in much the same way as they did before the new laws were enacted.

Figure II.3. Number of Registered Firearms in Australia



(Alpers, Lovell & Picard, 2022a)

These data show that reducing gun violence in Australia was not simply a matter of cutting the number of firearms. The weapons that were eliminated were the most dangerous kind; and the imported replacements have been less capable of rapid fire. In addition, the now larger civilian arsenal is contained within a smaller section of the population comprised of individuals who have undergone a much stricter vetting process than previously existed. Police forces in several states have set up dedicated gun crime task forces to pursue illegal firearms, as well as the criminals and the licensed gun owners who supply them (Johns, 2004; Ryan, 2018; NSW Police Force, 2022). Changes to policing – for example, surprise inspections of civilian firearm possession and arms dealerships – have encouraged new generations of officers to recognise the crime-fighting potential of toughened firearm legislation and to support its use (Sky News Australia, 2018; Pearson, 2019).

The legal reforms and buybacks have been accompanied by attitudinal change, driven by public and political determination. In the public consciousness of Australia, stringent gun control is now institutionalised. After decades of rejection by most states, uniform national gun owner licensing, firearm registration, and the removal of guns from situations of domestic violence and self-harm are now seen as basic norms (New Matilda, 2015; Essential Research, 2018).

Politicians, mass media, and voters reliably voice alarm at attempts to weaken the regulation of firearms (see, e.g., Dingwall, 2016; Taylor, 2022). As recently as 2019, in a public opinion poll following the Christchurch mosque mass shooting in New Zealand, 37% of respondents in Australia's largest state thought Australia's gun laws were too weak – a jump from 26% in 2018 (McGowan & Martin, 2019). Particularly in light of the mounting gun death epidemic in the United States, Australia's 1996 reforms and their effects – precipitous declines in mass shootings, gun homicides, and gun suicides – are frequently cited as a source of national pride (see, e.g., Baird, 2013; Geelong Advertiser, 2022; Creighton, 2022). One brief letter to the Editor expressed a sentiment that is commonly voiced: 'I have never voted conservative in my life, but I will always praise John Howard for his introduction of Australia's gun laws. A legacy of which he should be rightly very proud' (Douglas, 2022).

Box 3: The Limitations of Statistical Analysis when Examining the Effects of the National Firearms Agreement

Several studies have used statistical analysis to ascertain whether Australia's National Firearms Agreement was directly responsible for the reductions in mass shootings and firearm-related deaths outlined in this report (e.g., Leigh & Neill, 2010; Ramchand & Saunders, 2021; Baker & McPhedran, 2006; Lee & Suardi, 2008). Despite various complex regression methods, however, it is impossible to run a trial on the sort of sweeping real-world policy interventions involved in the NFA and subsequent reforms, as there is no control site or situation. Nonetheless, as Professor David Hemenway of Harvard University has noted, from a policy perspective, if the policymakers in 1996 had been told that the following 25 years would see such dramatic reductions in mass shootings and homicides, they undoubtedly would have considered their policy intervention a success (Unpublished peer review written in 2020 to the authors of a RAND Corporation research summary published the following year (Ramchand & Saunders, 2021)).

2. Policy Compliance

The many positive outcomes of the National Firearms Agreement have been achieved despite the agreement falling short of 100% compliance. At least five studies²⁰ have found that no Australian state or territory has at any stage fully complied with the 1996 and 2002 resolutions that collectively form the NFA (Council of Australian Governments, 2017). In important areas, state and territory legislation has been blocked or revised to dilute the effect of the NFA. Although two decades of political pressure from various interest groups have steadily reduced restrictions and undermined the NFA's original intent, the core principles and restrictions remain largely intact (Alpers & Rossetti, 2017).

²⁰ Warner & Moller (1997); Rath & Griffith (1999); Warner & Sherwood (2006); Davies & Mouzos (2007); Alpers & Rossetti (2017).

3. Costs of Australia's Policy Settings

Economists Leigh and Neill have estimated the value and cost of the 1996–97 gun buyback program, using the leading estimate of the value of a life in Australia of AU\$2.5 million and assuming there was no offsetting increase in non-firearm deaths (Leigh & Neill, 2010). They calculated that the ongoing yearly preventive benefits of the buyback have an economic value of AU\$500 million (US\$391/CA\$468 million using 1997 exchange rates). As this amount is the same as the buyback cost in the first place, the program has repaid the original investment every year since (Leigh & Neill, 2010).

III. Lessons from Australia and Other Countries

1. Why Regulate Firearms? The Public Health Approach

For many decades, injury by gunshot was seen almost exclusively as a ‘crime problem’, for which most proposed solutions were of the ‘bottom of the cliff’ variety – after-the-fact law enforcement and retribution (Zimring & Hawkins, 1997; Zimring, 1999). But to public health practitioners, bullets and firearms are the agents of harm, and both are amenable to standard injury prevention procedures. Instead of waiting until after damage is done, industrialised societies have developed a range of effective harm prevention measures for armed violence – just as they have for the tolls of automobile injury, tobacco-related disease, HIV/AIDS, smallpox, and many others (Hemenway, 2004).

On our roads, public health officials have deployed a holistic array of evidence-based public health measures to dramatically decrease the toll of death and injury by automobile (Hemenway & Lee, 2022; Sadat & George, 2019; CDC, 1994). Almost all parts of the world have embraced safer cars, safer roads, alcohol-restricting driving laws, traffic calming, and so on. Most importantly, however, automotive control is widely built on three pillars:

- The Person: License drivers
- The Object: Register vehicles
- The ‘Right’: Defined as a conditional privilege

The universal adoption of licensing and registration of vehicles since their advent did not lead to mass confiscation. Abusing the privilege of motorised mobility can result in loss of licence, yet cars remain symbols of masculinity, power, and freedom.

Public safety campaigns from road safety and tobacco harm reduction to HIV, smallpox, malaria, and Ebola have saved countless lives. The same is being done today with COVID-19. In each case, public health and legal communities have overcome the denial of self-interest groups, and the world followed that example (Kickbusch, Allen, & Franz, 2016; Bazell, Koh, & Bloom, 2022). Firearm policy responses can learn from the public health approaches taken by road traffic safety campaigners, smoking cessation advocates, and infectious disease control.

Box 4: Risks and Benefits of a Gun in the Home

Within gun control debates in Australia and elsewhere, a common argument is that keeping a firearm close to hand can provide a degree of safety. In summarising the available research on this contentious topic, one leading academic in the field of firearm injury prevention has concluded:

[T]he scientific studies suggest that the health risk of a gun in the home is greater than the benefit. There are no credible studies that indicate otherwise. The evidence is overwhelming that a gun in the home is a risk factor for completed suicide and that gun accidents are most likely to occur in homes with guns. There is compelling evidence that a gun in the home is a risk factor for intimidation and for killing women in their homes, and it appears that a gun in the home may more likely be used to threaten intimates than to protect against intruders. On the potential benefit side, there is no good evidence of a deterrent effect of firearms or that a gun in the home reduces the likelihood or severity of injury during an altercation or break-in (Hemenway, 2011).

Similarly, the authors of a recent study that followed 17.6 million Californians for up to twelve years concluded:

Although personal protection is a major motivation for purchasing firearms, existing studies suggest that people living in homes with firearms have higher risks for dying by homicide... Living with a handgun owner is associated with substantially elevated risk for dying by homicide. Women are disproportionately affected... Overall rates of homicide were more than twice as high among cohabitants of handgun owners than among cohabitants of nonowners... Among homicides occurring at home, cohabitants of owners had sevenfold higher rates of being fatally shot by a spouse or intimate partner (Studdert, Zhang et al., 2022).

2. How Should Firearms Be Regulated? The Three Pillars of Prevention

More than a century ago, countries ranging from Great Britain and Russia to Japan and China began to introduce or strengthen a wide range of legislation to control civilian possession of firearms. The most common reason given was to curb public shootings and civil unrest (Kopel, 1992). Adaptations of these laws have gradually propagated to more than 150 countries around the globe.²¹ Today in almost all nations, three central tenets of gun control law are dominant:

- The Person: License gun owners
- The Object: Register firearms
- The ‘Right’: Defined as a conditional privilege

As with the central pillars of driver licensing, motor vehicle registration, and road safety law as noted above, these three methods of firearm injury prevention, which will be examined more closely below, are interdependent. Together, they have become a *de facto* global standard (Alpers & Lovell, 2022d).

Since 1996, Australia’s national firearm policy has mandated the most comprehensive and holistic suite of legislation to implement these standards. The NFA did not prohibit or confiscate all guns, only the limited types shown to be most dangerous in mass killings (Australasian Police Ministers’ Council, 1996: 1).

²¹ See the website of GunPolicy.org.

As with cars, the country now has more firearms than at any previous time (**Figure II.3**). As with cars, the masculinity, individual power, and freedom of gun owners remain unaffected.

A. Pillar 1: Gun Owner Licensing

Of 198 sovereign States,²² 191 (96.46%) publish their legislation on gun ownership and possession (Alpers & Lovell, 2022b). Of these:

- 162 maintain a ‘complete’ licensing system for civilian gun owners (84.82%);
- 12 maintain partial licensing systems in which only certain categories of persons or firearms require a current gun owner licence (6.28%); and
- 16 States prohibit civilian firearm ownership (i.e., no licences issued) or otherwise do not maintain gun owner licensing systems (8.38%).

All 38 Member States of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) publish their legislation on gun owner licensing. Of these:

- 35 maintain a ‘complete’ national civilian gun owner licensing system (92.11%);
- 1 maintains a partial national licensing system in which only certain categories of persons or firearms require a licence to possess (2.63%); and
- 2 maintain no national licensing system for almost all gun owners (5.26%).

B. Pillar 2: Registration of Firearms

Of 198 sovereign States, 186 (93.94%) publish their legislation on firearm registration (Alpers & Lovell, 2022a). Of these:

- 168 require that civilian firearms be registered in some capacity (90.32%); and
- 18 countries prohibit civilian firearm ownership (i.e., no guns to register) or otherwise do not require that civilian firearms be registered (9.68%).

All 38 Member States of the OECD publish their legislation on firearm registration. Of these:

- 37 States require that civilian firearms be registered in some capacity (97.37%); and
- 1 State does not require that civilian firearms be registered (2.63%).

²² In addition to the 193 Member States of the United Nations, we include both UN Observer States (Palestine and the Holy See), plus three additional States with seats at the UN: Kosovo, Cook Islands and Niue. Each is a sovereign nation with its own independent national firearm legislation.

Resistance to a firearm registration system often includes the claim that a national register is too difficult or expensive. Yet to control epidemics of bovine disease, the European Community registers every cow (European Commission, 2022). In India, 280 million consumers (80% of households) use liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) for cooking and heating (DownToEarth.org, 2021). To discourage illegal manufacture and to limit explosions, their individually registered LPG cylinders are made, refilled, and exchanged by three closely controlled national companies (John, 2013; Hindu Business Line, 2020; Special Correspondent, 2021). As with most vehicles – of which there are more than a billion on the world’s roads – licensing and registration of potentially hazardous articles reduce public health risks and make people individually accountable for misuse.

C. Pillar 3: A ‘Right’ to Possess Firearms

Alpers and Lovell (2022c) have found that of 198 sovereign States:

- 2 guarantee a Constitutional right that is not limited by statute law (1.01%);
- 4 provide conditional guarantees that are limited by statute law (2.02%); and
- 192 provide no explicit guarantee or right to possess firearms (96.97%).

All 38 Member States of the OECD publish legislation regarding a right to possess firearms. Of these:

- 1 guarantees a Constitutional right not limited by statute law (2.63%);
- 2 provide conditional guarantees that are limited by statute law (5.26%); and
- 35 provide no explicit guarantee of a right to possess firearms (92.11%).

According to Article 10 of the Constitution of the United Mexican States, citizens have the constitutional right to possess guns at home for security and self-defence, except for types of weapons that are prohibited or reserved for armed forces. The text notes that federal law determines the conditions and circumstances in which individuals will be authorised to carry guns. In Guatemala, Article 38 of the Constitution recognises the right to possess firearms for personal use at home, except for prohibited weapons. Carrying a gun is also recognised as a right but is subject to regulation. Despite these constitutional mentions, both countries have relatively strict gun laws – for example, requiring registration of all firearms. By contrast, in the United States, the ‘right to keep and bear arms’ in the Constitution has posed a greater political and legal obstacle to the adoption of strong gun laws.

In 2021, the Czech Republic amended its Constitutional Code to state that ‘the right to defend one’s own life or the life of another person with a weapon is guaranteed under the conditions laid down by law’, as provided for in art. 6(4) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms. However, legal scholars have noted that the provision is primarily symbolic and does not make it easier to qualify for a firearm licence (Vikarská, 2021).

A few countries characterise gun possession as a right in their firearm legislation, even if not in their constitutions. For example, in Switzerland, Article 3 of the Federal Law on Weapons, Accessories and Ammunition guarantees the right to acquire, possess, and carry weapons in compliance with the law. Until recently, the gun law in Honduras recognised the right to own, possess, and carry firearms in compliance with the law (Law for Control of Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives and Similar Items, Art. 4).

However, 2019 saw a new law come into effect, aligning national firearm regulation with Honduras' international obligations, and dramatically modifying the underlying premise. The earlier mention of a right was replaced by a note in the Preamble that possession and use of firearms by civilians is generally permitted for protecting life and property. The new law requires proof of reason for a gun licence and cancellation of the licence if the reason ceases to apply as per Article 41 of the Honduras Law for Control of Firearms (2018). Significantly, one of the guiding principles is that provisions of the law are to be interpreted in a restrictive manner, the presumption being against the issuing of a licence, according to Article 4. No data are available yet to indicate whether this restrictive principle is being applied.

3. Other National Initiatives to Remove Firearms

Since 1990, dozens of countries have conducted weapon collection programmes in which at least 10,000 firearms were destroyed. These include Albania, Angola, Argentina, Australia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Canada, China, Colombia, Congo (ROC), Croatia, El Salvador, France, Germany, Haiti, Kosovo, Liberia, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Norway, Pakistan, Panama, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Uganda, United Kingdom, United States, Uruguay, and Venezuela (Karp, 2007; Karp, 2009; Florquin & Waszink, 2003). Some of these programmes were 'buybacks' in which owners were paid for their newly prohibited firearms. The more prominent of these are summarised below.

A. United Kingdom

Following the Hungerford mass shooting in August 1987, the United Kingdom banned semi-automatic centrefire rifles and some shotguns. After the Dunblane school shooting in March 1996, the United Kingdom further banned all handguns (pistols and revolvers) through the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 and the Firearms (Amendment) (No. 2) Act 1997. Owners were paid market rates for their firearms, parts, and accessories (Chapman, 2013). As of November 2000, the UK government had paid

GB£90.2 million (US\$D146 million) in compensation for returned firearms (Faltas, McDonald, & Waszink, 2001). A further national amnesty in 2003 collected another 43,908 guns (Home Office, 2003). From 1996 to 2009, 226,000 firearms were destroyed (Karp, 2009).

The rate of firearm-related death in the United Kingdom has always been low, and since the 1996–97 gun bans, this key indicator has continued to trend steadily downwards (Alpers, Lovell & Pavesi, 2022). The same 25-year period saw two mass shootings,²³ one in Cumbria in 2010 and another near Plymouth in 2021. All four UK shooting massacres were committed by a licensed gun owner with legally held firearms (Alpers, 2015; Plymouth Herald, 2021).

B. Brazil

Brazil leads the world as the country with the highest number of firearm-related deaths (Malta et al., 2020). During the first term of President Lula da Silva in 2003, the Brazilian Congress passed a Disarmament Statute (L. 8.10826/03), which applied unprecedented restrictions on purchasing firearms, prohibited civilians from carrying them, introduced a firearm register, and prescribed a gun buyback to reduce the number of weapons in circulation. Between 2004 and 2005, the National Voluntary Firearms Handover campaign, led by non-governmental organisations, churches, and an army of volunteers, collected 459,855 firearms, or three per cent of the estimated private holdings in Brazil (Dreyfus, Nascimento, & Guede, 2008). In the first two phases of the campaign, the Ministry of Justice paid BRL\$32.7 million (US\$14 million) to purchase guns for destruction (Dreyfus, Nascimento, & Guede, 2008). Over a six-year period, the buyback program removed as many as 1.1 million firearms from circulation (Ferrazares, Sabia, & Anderson, 2021).

According to the Brazilian Justice Ministry, as a result of the voluntary weapon collection campaign and the ban on carrying guns imposed by the new law, there was an 8.1% reduction in the number of deaths by firearm in 2005 as compared to 2004. This was the first drop in more than a decade, and UNESCO calculated that the projected impact of the reduction was a 15% decrease in gun deaths, or more than 5,000 lives that would be saved (Bandeira & Bourgois, 2006). States that collected more firearms per capita saw higher reductions in firearm deaths (Malta et al., 2020). The buyback campaign in the state and city of Rio de Janeiro had significant effects on gun violence, with an 11% drop in the rate of firearm-related deaths (Dreyfus, Nascimento, & Guede, 2008). According to

²³ In order to exclude far more common shootings between familiar persons (e.g., gang-related or domestic shootings), a mass shooting is defined here as five or more victims shot dead, not including the perpetrator (see Chapman, Alpers, & Jones, 2016).

the Mapa da Violência and Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada (IPEA), two research institutes in Brazil, the Disarmament Statute contributed to a sharp decline in gun-related homicides. Researchers there estimate that it may have saved as many as 160,000 lives between 2004 and 2012 (Muggah & Risso, 2019).

In 2018, as he campaigned successfully for the presidency of Brazil, Lula's successor Jair Bolsonaro promised to loosen gun laws. Since coming to power, his government has introduced more than 32 changes to make it easier for Brazilians to keep weapons at home; to halve the frequency of vetting gun owners by lengthening the validity of gun licences from five years to ten; to increase the number of guns allowed per person; and to loosen restrictions on ammunition and the ability to buy more powerful weapons. In 2020, police reported that the number of privately owned firearms had doubled since 2017. Experts predict 'a lot of consequences for many years' (Watson, 2021).

C. Argentina

After a fifteen-year-old boy killed three classmates at a school near Buenos Aires, in December 2006 the Government of Argentina established the National Programme for the Voluntary Surrender of Firearms (PEVAF, or 'the Disarmament Law'). Between July 2007 and December 2008, the programme collected 107,761 firearms for destruction (Ronconi, Lenis, & Schargrodsky, 2011). An innovative aspect of the buyback was that it classified gun violence as a critical public health problem.

Overall, from 2007 to 2015, more than 300,000 privately owned and state-owned firearms were destroyed (Ware, 2020), representing between 14% and 20% of the estimated total stock of weapons in the country. The PEVAF programme has since been biannually renewed by Congress according to Ley 27529/2019 (Argentina). In 2017 alone, the ongoing amnesty reported the surrender and destruction of 11,000 firearms (Argentina, 2018).

D. New Zealand

In the early 1980s, due to the inability of police and the reluctance of gun owners to keep accurate records, Police National Headquarters acknowledged that the national firearm register had broken down (Alpers, 1997; Forsyth, 1985; Kopel, 1992). Although shotguns had been exempt from registration since 1930, 'as the task was a burden for the police' (McCallum, 1982: 3), the Arms Act 1983 (NZ) still required that every licensed gun owner be held personally responsible for each rifle or handgun in their possession. During the same years in which desktop computers proliferated, NZ Police maintained a million individual records in two separate manual paper-card filing systems at

seventeen locations around the country (New Zealand Police, 1984). Two thirds of the licence certificates were found to contain errors, mainly incorrect addresses for gun owners (Alpers, 1996).

Despite its inaccuracies, the system was still being used. In 1982, a NZ Police survey found that of the officers who had consulted the country's firearm register for a criminal offence, 67% found that it assisted in the apprehension of an offender (McCallum, 1982). Three quarters of these officers had used the register successfully to help catch criminals more than three times each, solving cases from illegal gun sales to armed robbery. The survey concluded, 'The [firearm registration] index was of great assistance in locating offenders', and 'despite its shortcomings, the present registration index is widely used and is of benefit to the police' (McCallum, 1982). Of the 172 police officers polled, 161 (94%) wanted to keep the existing system of firearm registration (McCallum, 1982 Appendix R; 6:5.3).

A few months later, New Zealand scrapped its register of rifles, leaving 97% of privately owned firearms no longer registered to their owners. In announcing the new system of owner-licensing only, a police media release declared, 'A major piece of good news with the introduction of the new Arms Act is that there is to be no limit on numbers of firearms anyone may gather as his personal collection' (McMillan, 1984). Handguns, restricted weapons, and (from 1992) Military Style Semi-Automatic long guns (MSSAs) remained registered, subject to stringent storage requirements and attentive policing. The result of these restrictions on the firearms considered to be most dangerous is that crime with registered firearms in New Zealand is rare (Alpers & Morgan, 1995; Bird, 1973). However, those firearms that are subject to minimal restrictions have proliferated and become the most frequently misused. Common sporting long guns – both full-length and sawn-off – are the weapons most used in gun homicide and in non-fatal misuse of guns, including firearm-related domestic violence (Gardiner, Norton, & Alpers, 1996).

In 2019, an Australian visitor who had been denied such weapons in his own country exploited New Zealand's lack of regulation to gain a firearm licence and to buy and convert an entry-level rifle into an 'assault rifle'. On 15 March, while live-streaming his massacre on the Internet, this licensed gun owner fatally shot 51 people and injured another 40 at two Christchurch mosques (Christchurch Mosque Shootings, 2022). Less than a month later on 10 April, MPs voted 119–1 to ban, then to buy back centrefire semi-automatic firearms, their accessories, and parts (Faidell & Wright, 2019). The Arms Amendment Act 2019, which received royal assent the following day, also prohibited ownership of some pump-action shotguns, other self-loading long guns, and most large-capacity ammunition magazines. Semi-automatic .22 rimfire rifles with a capacity of ten rounds or less, plus five-shot-or-

less shotguns were exempted (New Zealand Police, 2019). In a five-month amnesty from prosecution and gun buyback, which ended on 20 December 2019, owners were paid market price. A total of 57,716 firearms and 205,209 magazines and parts were collected for destruction, at a cost of NZ\$103.8 million (US\$65/CA\$86million) (New Zealand Police, 2020). In the absence of evidence due to decades of data decay, it is estimated that between 55,000 and 240,000 prohibited firearms might remain to be found and destroyed (New Zealand Controller & Auditor General, 2020).

In June 2020, the Arms Act was significantly amended. Commencing in June 2023, every firearm will once again be registered to each owner. The aim is to populate a fresh, computerised firearm registry with new data as gun owners renew their licences or transfer firearms to other owners over a five-year period from June 2023 to June 2028, or later (New Zealand Police, 2022).

4. Evaluation of Buybacks

Only the Australian and Brazilian gun buybacks have been evaluated in peer-reviewed studies. Long-term analyses of the British and Argentinian programmes seem non-existent, and the tightening of gun laws in New Zealand is too recent to show clear effects. Due to confounding factors, it is commonly not possible to establish the cause of any post-buyback changes in broader categories, for example in gun homicide, overall homicide, or violent crime as a whole.

5. Firearms in Canada from an International Comparative Perspective

These data visualisations compare Canada to other countries in the following categories, in both English and French:

- [Rate of Civilian Firearm Possession per 100 Population](#)
- [Proportion of Households with Firearms](#)
- [Rate of Licensed Firearm Owners per 100 Population](#)
- [Rate of Registered Firearms per 100 Population](#)
- [Rate of All Gun Deaths per 100,000 People](#)
- [Rate of Gun Homicide per 100,000 People](#)
- [Rate of Gun Suicide per 100,000 People](#)

Hundreds more comparisons can be charted between Canada and other individual countries using the GunPolicy.org interactive visualization tool for that country (Alpers, Picard & Pavesi, 2022a).

IV. Conclusions

The Australian experience with firearm regulation provides important lessons for other jurisdictions with high rates of gun violence. This example demonstrates that taking a public health approach to firearm injury prevention by reducing access, strengthening regulation, and engaging the community can reduce gun deaths. Along with emerging evidence in New Zealand after the Christchurch mosque massacre, it also shows that a mass shooting incident can be a galvanising event for a country to improve policies on a wide scale. Australia's sweeping policy change used a substantial amount of the political capital of the relatively new, right-leaning Prime Minister. The support of many conservatives was crucial and was secured by overwhelming pro-firearm regulation opinion polls and media pressure. Gun policy reforms were supported by all major political parties, whereas conservative parties in many other countries staunchly oppose such reforms. The success of firearm regulation has since become a source of pride for many Australians.

Mass shootings account for a small proportion of firearm-related deaths, but they tend to receive a substantial amount of media coverage and can focus the attention of the public and politicians on gun violence more broadly. Although preventing gun deaths is essential, focusing on deaths obscures another tragic reality of firearm violence. Beyond the people killed with firearms, a larger number are injured and have life-changing pain, disability, and psychological distress, which leads to substantial expenses related to medical care, mental health care, and rehabilitation. Australian firearm policy now focuses more than it did in the mid-1990s on domestic and family violence, which often involves additional victims besides intimate partners, including children.

While firearm injury prevention has been a notable public health success in Australia, the field of firearm injury prevention is remarkably under-researched and poorly understood. This public policy gap undermines gun control successes. Data on firearms and firearm violence in Australia is patchy, inconsistent, and incomplete. Most studies are based only on deaths and ignore injuries completely. Eight jurisdictions store widely variable data, often in obsolete and inaccurate firearm registers. In order to support the policy response, strong data collection and data use, as well as data-sharing across jurisdictions, are required. This can allow the monitoring of trends and impacts as well as the analysis of the impact of policy changes over time.

The Australian experience also highlights the need for a multi-pronged approach to firearm violence prevention. Australia's policy response was not only about the high-profile buyback but built on a range of policy actions and regulations that have held up over time despite consistent attempts to dilute them.

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