

Australia 20 years after gun reform—no mass shootings, declining firearm deaths

June 22 2016

Since gun law reform and the Firearms Buyback program 20 years ago, Australia has seen an accelerating decline in intentional firearm deaths and an absence of fatal mass shootings, the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* reports today in a landmark study.

"The absence of [mass shootings](#) in Australia in the past two decades compares to 13 fatal mass shootings in the 18 years prior to these sweeping reforms," says the University of Sydney's Emeritus Professor Simon Chapman, who led the study with colleagues Philip Alpers and Macquarie University's Professor Mike Jones.

The introduction of Australia's unprecedented gun laws followed the mass firearm shooting in April of 1996, when a man used two semiautomatic rifles to kill 35 people and wound 19 others in Port Arthur, Tasmania.

In June 1996 the federal government enacted new gun laws banning rapid-fire long guns, including those already in private ownership, explicitly to reduce their availability for mass shootings. These gun laws were progressively implemented in all six states and two territories between June 1996 and August 1998.

In addition, by 1 January 1997, federal and all state governments commenced a mandatory buyback at market price of prohibited firearms. From 1 October 1997, large criminal penalties, including imprisonment and heavy fines, applied to possession of any prohibited

weapon.

A handgun buyback followed in 2003, and thousands of gun owners also voluntarily surrendered additional, non-prohibited firearms without compensation. Since 1996, more than a million privately owned firearms are known to have been surrendered or seized, then melted down.

Also, despite a surge of post-law gun buying to replace destroyed semiautomatic and other rapid-fire weapons with single-shot rifles and shotguns, in a trend that preceded the Firearms Buyback program - which seems to have been accelerated by this initiative - the proportion of Australian households reporting private gun ownership declined by 75 per cent between 1988 and 2005.

Key findings

In the 18 years prior to federal and state government gun reforms (1979-1996) Australia saw 13 fatal mass shootings in which 104 victims were killed and at least another 52 were wounded. There have been no fatal mass shootings since that time. 'Mass shootings' were defined as five or more victims killed by gunshot, not counting the perpetrator(s).

From 1979 to 1996, total firearm deaths in Australia were declining at an average 3 per cent per year. Since then, the average decline in total firearm deaths has accelerated significantly to 5 per cent annually.

Over the same comparison period, there was a significant acceleration in the downward trend for firearm suicides and a non-significant acceleration in the downward trend in firearm homicides.

The researchers also examined total all-cause homicide and all-method suicide data to assess the possibility that reduced access to firearms permitted the substitution of other lethal methods, such as knives or

hanging, to commit suicide or homicide.

From 1979 to 1996, the average annual rate of total nonfirearm suicide and homicide deaths was rising at 2.1 per cent per year. Since then, the average annual rate of total nonfirearm suicide and homicide deaths has been declining by 1.4 per cent, supporting a conclusion that there has been no substitution of other lethal means for suicides or homicides.

"Opponents of public health measures to reduce the availability of firearms often claim that 'killers just find another way.' Our findings show the opposite: there is no evidence of murderers moving to other methods, and the same is true of suicide," said co-author Philip Alpers.

Finally, researchers compared changes in firearm deaths and nonfirearm deaths and suicides before and after the gun law reforms to assess whether the observed change in firearm deaths can be attributed to gun law reforms.

While there was a more rapid decline in firearm deaths from 1997 to 2013 compared to before 1997, there was also a greater acceleration in the decline in total nonfirearm suicide and homicide deaths. Because of this, it is not possible to determine whether the change in firearm deaths can be attributed to gun law reforms.

Macquarie University's Professor Mike Jones says: "To me there are two key findings from this study. One is that in the 20 years after the passage of gun control laws there has not been a mass shooting in Australia despite an average of two every three years for some time before that. The other is that the acceleration of the decline in gun-related deaths means lives saved. We can argue over how many but the data says lives have been saved."

Professor Simon Chapman said: "Australia's experience shows that

banning rapid-fire firearms was associated with reductions in mass shootings and total firearm deaths. In today's context, these findings offer an example which, with public support and political courage, might reduce [gun](#) deaths in other countries."

More information: *JAMA*, [DOI: 10.1001/jama.2016.8752](https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2016.8752)

Provided by University of Sydney

Citation: Australia 20 years after gun reform—no mass shootings, declining firearm deaths (2016, June 22) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-06-australia-years-gun-reformno-mass.html>

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