

# Firearm Injury Prevention

## Policy Position Statement

- Key messages:** Reductions in firearm related deaths and injuries can be achieved through the combined use of a range of strategies, including policy, legislative and regulatory frameworks, education, comprehensive suicide prevention programs, accessible social and health services, and targeted crime reduction efforts. The greatest potential to reduce firearm related deaths in Australia lies in the prevention of suicides.
- Key policy positions:**
1. The Commonwealth, in conjunction with State and Territory governments, should address the identified risk factors for intentional firearm injury, recognising the need for:
    - preventive mental health services (including suicide prevention)
    - greater efforts to prevent family and domestic violence.
    - initiatives to support men’s health and wellbeing.
    - initiatives to prevent firearm use in crime.
    - greater efforts to support safer firearm use by rural populations.
    - an increased research focus on the role of the above issues and their intersection with firearm use.
  2. Governments should investigate means through which to reduce the number of firearms in the community and firearms which enter the illegal market in Australia, placing particular emphasis on understanding how firearms used in homicides and other violent crimes are obtained.
- Audience:** Federal, State and Territory Governments, policy makers and the general public.
- Responsibility:** PHAA Injury Prevention Special Interest Group
- Date adopted:** September 2023
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- Citation:** Firearm Injury Prevention: Policy Position Statement [Internet]. Canberra: Public Health Association of Australia; 2012 [updated Sep 2023]. Available from: URL

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## Policy position statement

### PHAA affirms the following principles:

1. Firearm injuries occur due to a combination of the availability of firearms, motivation for use and community attitudes, as well as broader social, environmental, and economic factors.<sup>1</sup>
2. Reductions in firearm related deaths can be achieved through the combined use of a range of strategies, including regulatory frameworks, education, comprehensive suicide prevention programs, accessible social and health services, investing in the prevention of domestic and family violence, and targeted crime reduction efforts.<sup>1-7</sup>
3. The greatest potential to reduce firearm related deaths and injuries in Australia, particularly among males, lies in the prevention of suicides and self-harm. For females, in addition to suicide prevention efforts, there is value in ensuring that perpetrators of intimate partner/interpersonal violence, do not possess or have access to firearms.

### PHAA notes the following evidence:

4. In 2019-20, there were 199 registered deaths related to firearms in Australia, including all injury types (suicides, assaults, undetermined intent). There were 3,217 recorded suicides in Australia of which 159 (4.9%) involved firearms, and 245 deaths due to assault, 27 of which (11%) involved firearms.<sup>8</sup> (Note: Australian Bureau of Statistics Causes of Death data are subject to revision.)
5. Suicide accounted for 79.8% of the firearm-related deaths in 2019-20, with homicide accounting for 13.5%. There were 3 deaths (1.5%) recorded as unintentional (i.e., accidental discharge of firearms). The remainder were of undetermined intent (10 deaths, 5%).
6. In 2019-20, men accounted for 90.9% of all firearm deaths, with 81.7% of all male firearm deaths being from suicide.<sup>9</sup>
7. The age group with the highest number of suicide deaths involving firearms among males was the 45–64-year-old group, accounting for 40.5% of deaths. This was closely followed by the 65+ years age group, which accounted for 37.8% of deaths. For females, suicide by firearm was highest in the 25-44 and 45 – 64 years age groups, with 4 deaths in each category (accounting for a combined 72.7% of female suicides involving firearms).<sup>10</sup>
8. Firearm death rates remain higher in rural and remote regions than in urban areas, reflecting the higher overall rates of suicide in rural and remote regions.<sup>11-13</sup>
9. In 2019, the majority of firearm suicides (82.7%) involved a long gun, 13.3% involved handguns, and 3.8% involved other or unspecified firearms. In 2020, firearms were involved in 12.2% of all homicide deaths, down from 16% in 2019.<sup>14</sup>
10. Homicides involving firearms have been declining since the late 1980's. From 1989-90 over 25% of all homicides involved firearms by 2019-20 this had reduced to 11%. In comparison, homicides involving knives has remained at approximately 30% over the same time period.<sup>15</sup>

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11. Over the period 2000-01 to 2007-08, on average, 91% of firearms used to commit homicide were unregistered, and 88% of offenders were unlicensed.<sup>16</sup>
12. In 2012-14, gunshot wounds were the third most common cause of death for victims of domestic homicide in Australia.<sup>17</sup>
13. There is a lack of up to date, published information about the incidence of firearms use in intimate partner violence in Australia, and the legal status of those firearms.
14. While firearm related homicides have been declining since the 1980s, the proportion of firearm homicides involving handguns (including illegally shortened or 'sawn off' firearms) has increased.<sup>9,15</sup>
15. Firearm laws are the responsibility of state & territory governments. In 2017 all jurisdictions reaffirmed their commitment to the 1996 10-point National Firearms Agreement (NFA).<sup>18</sup> This established a minimum set of requirements for the use and possession of firearms. Key resolutions included banning military style automatic and semi-automatic firearms, introducing registration for all firearms, tightening licensing procedures, implementing stricter storage requirements, and requiring all sales to be conducted by or through licensed firearms dealers.
16. As of 2023 no jurisdiction is fully compliant with the NFA.<sup>19</sup>
17. Since 1996, two temporary national firearms amnesties have been held in Australia with approximately 707,000 firearms and weapons surrendered. In 2021 a permanent national firearms amnesty was introduced with 17,543 firearms and 606 firearms parts and accessories surrendered in the first twelve months.<sup>20</sup>
18. It is difficult to confirm a causal relationship between the NFA and changes in rates of injury and death because of the complexities of the Agreement, and changes in societal factors. However, the correlations are clear. In contrast to many other developed nations, in Australia there has only been one mass shooting death incidents with five or more fatalities since 1996.<sup>21</sup> The annual rate of gun deaths reduced from 2.9 per 100,000 in 1996 to 0.9 per 100,000 in 2019.<sup>14</sup> Although the rates had already been declining prior to the NFA, the rate of decline was more rapid between 1997 and 2013 compared with before 1997. In particular, the rate of firearm suicide after the NFA was less than would have been expected given the rate prior to the NFA.<sup>2,19,22</sup>
19. The number of registered firearms in Australia has been increasing since 2007 and in 2020 there were 3,518,025.<sup>23,24</sup>
20. Subsequent government action from 2002 has included the National Handgun Agreement (NHA) and the National Firearms Trafficking Policy Agreement (NFTPA).
21. Without the intervention of gun reforms in 1996, Australia may have expected up to 16 additional mass shootings between 1996-2008.<sup>25</sup>

### **PHAA seeks the following actions:**

22. A range of strategies and programs is required to address the risk factors for intentional and unintentional use of firearms causing injury, including community education and targeted strategies to enforce licensing and secure storage, as well as broader social services and programs aimed at suicide prevention, and efforts to reduce driving factors for illicit firearm use and firearm violence. Programs focussing on rural populations should be developed in consultation with these communities.

23. The design of such programs should be informed by robust scientific evidence, be closely targeted to and developed in partnership with groups most at risk and be subject to rigorous evaluation.
24. Ongoing effort and the investment of resources by Commonwealth, State and Territory governments is required to improve the quality, availability, and dissemination of data to inform firearms injury prevention in Australia, including:
- where possible, information on death certificates should include the type of firearm used, as per World Health Organisation ICD-11 categories.
  - publishing information about the source/s of firearms used in crimes.
  - publishing statistics around firearm-related injury cases presenting to hospitals.
  - reviewing current processes and systems for registering firearms including National Firearms Register.
  - publishing information on the legal status of firearms used in domestic homicides or domestic violence incidents.
25. Address the flow of firearms into the community (both legal and illegal). This would include:
- Improving the storage of firearms to reduce their ability to be stolen and used by those without a licence. Such improvements may include fixing gun safes, so they are harder to be removed from the premises, adding alarm systems and storage of the ammunition, and firing mechanism (in older firearms) in a different location from the firearm.
  - Consistent enforcement of firearm regulations and safety protocols: Ensuring that firearms are stored according to the law and where possible in a secure facility like a police station, ensuring that people who hold firearms hold a licence, ensuring that the sale of firearms is recorded and the person who purchases the firearm is licenced. This includes ensuring the 28-day cooling off period is used for all firearms purchases and that purchasers are over the age of 18 years.
  - Recording of stolen firearms and working across jurisdictions to follow and remove these firearms from the community.
  - Ensuring that people who own firearms only own the number they require and exploring a maximum number which can be stored at a home or business (other than those which are related to law enforcement) to reduce the number of firearms which could potentially enter the illegal market from a household.
  - Continuation of the permanent firearms amnesty.
  - Consistent application of firearm legislation across all states and territories to ensure that there is a strong consistent response to firearms in Australia. This includes compliance with the National Firearms Agreement (2017) by all Australian jurisdictions.
  - A National Firearms Register that enables first responders and other approved agencies access to real time data on firearms and firearm owners.
26. Any industry-based firearms advisory council should have its role restricted to advice on technical matters, with no policy issues discussed. Any group advising on firearms policy should include representation from public health but not industry.
27. Recognising the need for appropriate and cost-effective investment of resources, the Commonwealth, in conjunction with State and Territory governments, should address the risk factors for intentional injury, recognising the need:
- for preventive mental health services to reduce suicide through training programs and referral of those at risk of suicide.

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- to adequately fund support, treatment and rehabilitation programs for people who are at risk of suicide, especially those in rural locations.
- for greater efforts to prevent family and domestic violence in all its forms.
- to develop initiatives to support men's health, wellbeing, and participation in society.
- to address motivations for firearm, use in violent crime through education campaigns.

28. The Commonwealth, in conjunction with State and Territory governments should:

- implement a National Firearms Register for monitoring firearms across Australia.
- investigate the means through which firearms enter the illegal market in Australia, including but not necessarily limited to illegal import, theft, manufacture, and re-activation of deactivated firearms.
- reduce the number of firearms in the community, including the 'grey market' created by non-compliance with the NFA.<sup>26</sup>
- improve the safe storage of firearms in the community and reduction of thefts.
- ensure consistent strong firearm legislation in all state and territories.
- fund ongoing monitoring and reporting on firearms, ownership, and use in Australia to inform future policy, this could be achieved through an annual licencing levy.

### **PHAA resolves to:**

29. Advocate for the above steps to be taken based on the principles in this position statement.

**ADOPTED 2023**

**(First adopted 2012; revised 2015, 2018 & 2023)**

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