Firearm Injuries
Policy Position Statement

Key messages: 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, 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 in particular 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 address motivations for firearm use in violent crime
   - specific programs addressing rural populations.

   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 means through which 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

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Contacts: Richard Franklin & Lyndal Budeja, Co-Convenors, IP SIG
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Note: See also related PHAA policies on Mental Health; Domestic and Family Violence; Health Inequities; Illicit Drugs and Alcohol.

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.¹

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, and targeted crime reduction efforts.¹⁻⁷

3. The greatest potential to reduce firearm related deaths in Australia, particularly among males, lies in the prevention of suicides. For females, in addition to suicide prevention efforts, there is value in ensuring that perpetrators of intimate partner/interpersonal violence, do not possess firearms.

PHAA notes the following evidence:

4. In 2016, there were 238 registered deaths related to firearms in Australia accounting for 2% of total deaths from external causes (n=10,736), including all injury types (including suicides and assaults).⁸ There were 2,862 recorded suicides in Australia of which 183 (6.4%) involved firearms, and 244 deaths due to assault, 42 of which (17.2%) involved firearms.⁸ (Note: Australian Bureau of Statistics Causes of Death data are subject to revision.)

5. Suicide accounted for 76.9% of the firearm related deaths in 2016, with homicide accounting for 17.6%. There were five deaths (2%) recorded as unintentional (i.e., accidental discharge of firearms). The rest were of undetermined intent (2 deaths) and due to legal intervention (6 deaths).⁸

6. In 2016 men accounted for 91.6% of all firearm deaths, with 79.3% of all male firearm deaths being from suicide.⁸

7. Although suicide rates among middle aged and older Australians have decreased since the 1980s, older people are more likely to use firearms, compared to younger persons, with rates typically highest, on average, among persons aged 70 and over.⁹

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.¹⁰,¹¹

9. In 2016, the majority of firearm suicides (85.8%) involved a rifle or shotgun, followed by other / unspecified firearms and handguns, and firearms were involved in 17.2% of all assault-related deaths and 12.2% of female assault-related deaths.⁸
10. Homicides involving firearms have been declining since the late 1980’s. From 1989-90 over 25% of all homicides involved firearms by 2012-14 this had reduced to 14%. In comparison, homicides involving knives has remained at approximately 30% over the same time period.\textsuperscript{12}

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.\textsuperscript{13}

12. Of firearm homicides in 2012-14, 41% were domestic, a further 27% occurred between intimate partners and only 13% involved strangers.\textsuperscript{12}

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.\textsuperscript{8, 12}

15. Firearm laws are the responsibility of state governments. Since 1996 all jurisdictions have subscribed to the 10-point National Firearms Agreement (NFA). 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. Since 1996 it has been reported that 948,388 firearms were surrendered under Commonwealth Government funded firearms ‘buyback’ schemes.\textsuperscript{14}

16. 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 have been zero mass shooting death incidents with five or more fatalities since 1996. The annual rate of gun deaths reduced from 2.9 per 100,000 in 1996 to 0.9 per 100,000 in 2016. 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.\textsuperscript{2, 15, 16}

17. The number of registered firearms in Australia has been increasing since 2007 and in 2017 there were 3,158,795.\textsuperscript{14}

18. Subsequent government action from 2002 has included the National Handgun Agreement (NHA) and the National Firearms Trafficking Policy Agreement (NFTPA).

PHAA seeks the following actions:

19. A range of 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 should be also be developed to focus on rural populations.

20. 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.
21. 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-10 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.
- publishing information on the legal status of firearms used in domestic homicides.

22. Address the flow of firearms into the community (both legal and illegal). This would include:

- Improving the storage of firearms to reduced 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 a different location from the firearm.
- Enforcement - 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 also 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 purchase of firearms 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.
- An ongoing amnesty / buyback to remove firearms from the community.
- Consistent application of firearm legislation across all states and territories to ensure that there is a strong consistent response to firearms in Australia.

23. 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.

24. 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 in particular the need:

- for preventive mental health services to reduce suicide through training programs and referral of those at risk of suicide.
- 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.
25. The Commonwealth, in conjunction with State and Territory governments should:
   - 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.
   - 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.

PHAA resolves to:

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

ADOPTED 2018

(First adopted 2012; revised 2015)

References