



No. 230

Firearms Theft in Australia

Jenny Mouzos

A total of 25,171 firearms were reported stolen to police in Australia between 1994 and 2000. This equates to an average of about 12 firearms reported stolen per day. The majority of firearms reported stolen are rifles (51%), followed by shotguns (21%) and handguns (14%). Most firearms are reported stolen from a residential premise (81%). Currently there are over two million registered firearms in Australia and, annually, less than one per cent are reported stolen to police. This means that, on average, over 4,000 legal firearms are stolen annually in Australia and, most importantly, there is the possibility that at least some of these are being transferred into the illegitimate firearms market. Over the six-year period examined there has been a decline in the number of firearms reported stolen, suggesting vigilance of firearms owners in securing their firearms, making them less accessible to thieves. The findings of this paper re-emphasise the need for policy to focus on reducing the number of firearms stolen, and for further research on identifying the sources of firearms used in crime in Australia.

Adam Graycar
Director

Firearm regulation schemes—such as the National Firearms Agreement (NFA) introduced across all Australian states and territories in May 1996—control the legitimate or authorised market for firearms by limiting access to firearms to persons deemed “responsible”. However, restrictions on the legitimate ownership and availability of firearms may open up new opportunities for criminals by making illegal firearms more lucrative. In theory, there are three major illegal sources of firearms: theft, smuggling, and illicit manufacturing (Dandurand 1998). This paper focuses on the theft of firearms in Australia.

Since the firearms reforms of 1996, persons may be unlikely to report a firearm stolen if they are not licensed to own that firearm, or if the firearm was not registered. In other words, a firearm owner—for fear of repercussions—may not report the theft of a firearm if its possession is deemed an offence. This is considered a major limitation in attempting to accurately quantify the number of firearms stolen in Australia. The figures presented in this report are based on the number of firearms reported stolen to police services across Australia between 1 July 1994 and 30 June 2000 (effectively excluding unreported thefts).

Purpose of the Report

Reports about firearms theft appear now and then in the media, especially when it is of a large quantity or of high-powered firearms. Media reporting of such incidents may have raised concerns that the new restrictions on lawfully obtaining firearms may have led to increased theft against legitimate owners. The Australian Institute of Criminology, through its National Firearms Monitoring Program, aims to provide the factual information required to determine the current situation in relation to the theft of firearms in Australia. In brief, the purposes of this report are:

- to examine the incidence of the theft of firearms over a six-year period;
- to determine the types of firearms commonly stolen; and
- to determine which locations are usually targeted in the theft of firearms.

Each of these issues will be examined, focusing specifically on changes in trends and patterns of the theft of firearms over time in Australia. In addition, this paper presents (for the first time since the

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national firearms licensing and registration system was introduced) data on the extent of firearm ownership in Australia.

Observations from International Research

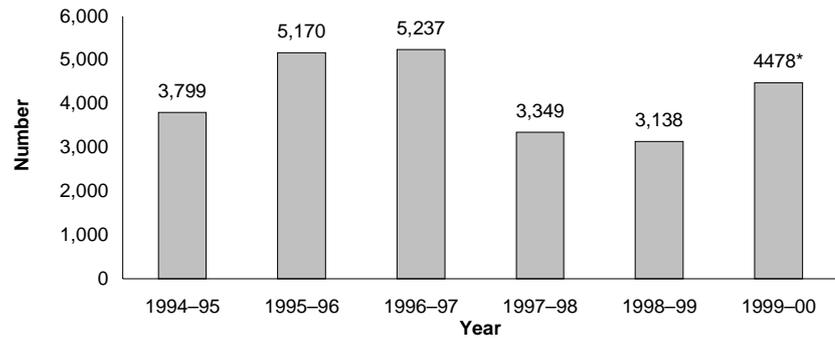
There is a paucity of Australian research specifically examining the theft of firearms, but we can turn to research conducted overseas as a starting point. International research can assist in providing useful background information as to what the expected characteristics of the phenomenon to be studied in Australia might be. However, it is important to note that while international research may be informative, its applicability and comparability with Australia is limited. This is due to the differences that exist between Australia and other countries in terms of firearm accessibility, ownership and regulation.

One of the most frequently cited studies that explored the patterns of acquisition, carrying and use of firearms and other weapons in the commission of criminal acts was that of Wright and Rossi (1986). Their sample consisted of 1,982 self-administered questionnaires to convicted felons serving sentences across 10 states in the United States between August 1982 and January 1983. Wright and Rossi (1986) found that theft was a major source of the firearms used by the felons who completed the prison survey.

Other studies have arrived at similar conclusions to Wright and Rossi. The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) in the United States reported that an estimated 341,000 incidents of firearm theft occurred per year between 1987 and 1992 (United States Bureau of Justice Statistics 1994). These figures only relate to the number of incidents, and not the number of firearms stolen per incident. The majority of the incidents of firearms theft occurred during a household burglary or theft (79.2%). A further four per cent were reported stolen during a violent crime or personal theft. Just over half of the incidents involved the theft of a handgun.

More recent estimates suggest that 600,000 firearms (long-arms and handguns) were stolen from residential premises in 1994 in the United States (Cook & Ludwig

Figure 1: Firearms stolen in Australia



* This includes the Peterborough incident in South Australia where approximately 600 handguns were stolen from one dealer.
Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, National Firearms Monitoring Program, 1994-95 to 1999-2000 [computer file]

1997). In terms of access to the firearms, Cook and Ludwig (1997, p. 2) found that “slightly more than half of all privately owned firearms were stored unlocked; 16 per cent of firearms were stored unlocked and loaded”.

Another study, undertaken in the United Kingdom by the Home Office’s Research and Planning Unit, analysed 643 firearm theft reports from 16 police services in England and Wales (Corkery 1994). The study reported that the majority of firearms were stolen during the course of a residential burglary in built-up areas. Shotguns (36%), followed by handguns (29%), were the most commonly stolen firearms. While in most cases there was little information provided on the security measures taken by the victims, the study found that in 79 per cent of cases there was some form of security in use. Nonetheless, over half of the offenders (58%) forced open a secure armoury or container in order to steal the firearm(s).

New Zealand research (see Gardiner, Norton & Alpers 1996; Alpers & Walters 1998; Newbold 1999) finds further support for the notion that firearms are most commonly stolen from residential

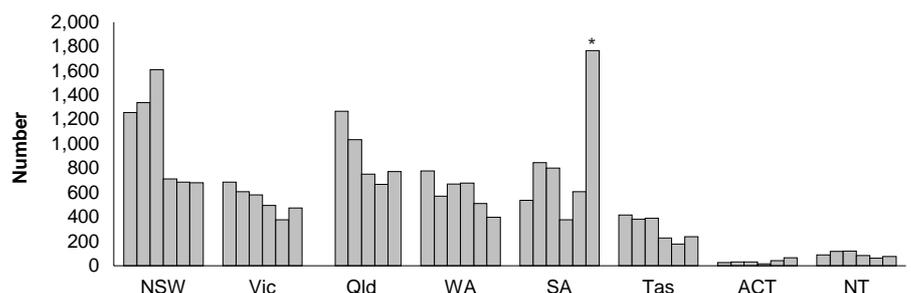
premises. Alpers and Walters (1998) reported that 60 per cent of firearms were stolen from an urban dwelling, with rifles (54%), shotguns (34%) and handguns (5%) the most common weapons stolen in New Zealand. They also found that 52 per cent of the 88 incidents of firearms theft involved firearms that had not been securely stored by their owners.

An important concern raised by Alpers and Walters was the potential public danger associated with stolen weaponry. They found that close to one-quarter of the incidents involving firearms theft were subsequently linked to an act of violence and/or crime.

International research suggests that the majority of firearms are stolen from residential premises during household burglaries. However, it is important to note that the figures on the proportion of firearms stolen and subsequently used in the commission of an offence are relatively low and fluctuate from study to study.

Another issue raised points to storage requirements and compliance by firearms owners in securing their firearms. The New Zealand Review of Firearms Controls conducted on-the-spot

Figure 2: Firearms stolen by jurisdiction, 1994-95 to 1999-2000



* This includes the Peterborough incident in South Australia where approximately 600 handguns were stolen from one dealer.
Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, National Firearms Monitoring Program, 1994-95 to 1999-2000 [computer file]

checks with firearms licensees to assess compliance with secure storage regulations (Thorp 1997, cited in Alpers & Walters 1998). The review reported an 88 per cent compliance rate (77 per cent for rural areas) of the 219 completed checks. Despite the high compliance rate, as one study showed (see Corkery 1994), sometimes even the secure storage of firearms may be ineffective in deterring a determined thief.

The Situation in Australia

Between 1 July 1994 and 30 June 2000, a total of 25,171 firearms were reported stolen to police in Australia (Figure 1). This equates to an average of 4,195 firearms stolen per year across the six-year period. Since 1996–97 the number of firearms stolen in Australia has declined. This suggests that the introduction of the NFA, which applied stringent safekeeping requirements for the storage of firearms, is having the desired effect: securely stored firearms are proving less vulnerable to theft.

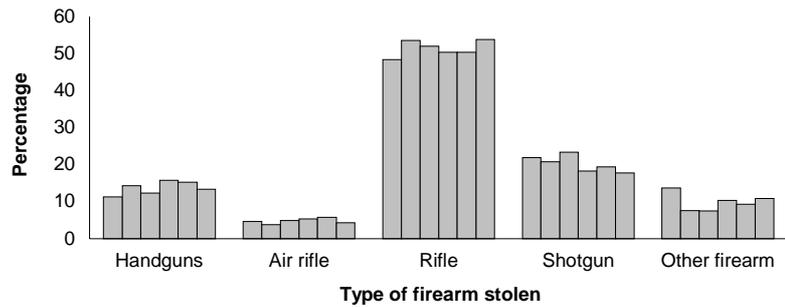
One-quarter of the firearms reported stolen in Australia during the six-year period were stolen in New South Wales (Figure 2). South Australia accounted for the second highest source of stolen firearms, accounting for 20 per cent; however, the peak in the number of firearms reported stolen from South Australia in 1999–2000 was due to the theft of about 600 handguns from one dealer in Peterborough.

Other jurisdictions also experienced a slight increase in the number of firearms stolen in 1999–2000. For example, Victoria increased from 378 in 1998–99 to 476 in 1999–2000; Queensland increased from 668 in 1998–99 to 773 in 1999–2000; Tasmania increased from 180 in 1998–99 to 240 in 1999–2000; and the Northern Territory increased from 63 in 1998–99 to 76 in 1999–2000.

Types of Firearms Stolen

In terms of type of firearm,¹ it appears that rifles are the most common type of gun stolen in Australia,² accounting for just over half of the firearms stolen (52%) (Figure 3). The second most common type of firearm stolen is shotguns (21%). While handguns were the most common type of firearm stolen in the United States, only 14 per cent of firearms stolen in Australia during the six-year

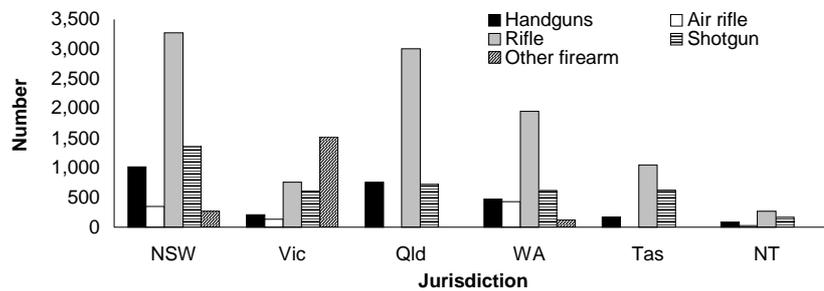
Figure 3: Type of firearm stolen as a proportion of all stolen firearms, 1994–95 to 1999–2000



Note: Information on the “type of firearm” stolen was only available for New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory.

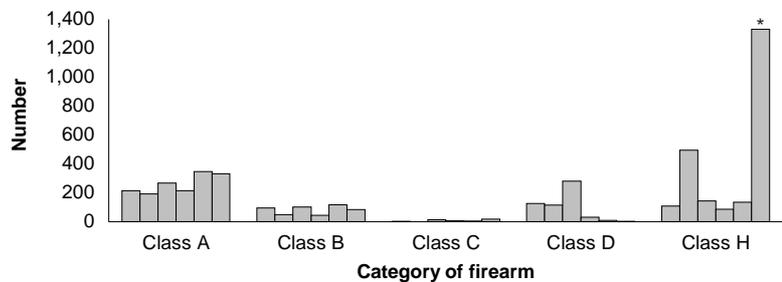
Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, National Firearms Monitoring Program, 1994–95 to 1999–2000 [computer file]

Figure 4: Type of firearm stolen by jurisdiction, 1994–95 to 1999–2000



Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, National Firearms Monitoring Program, 1994–95 to 1999–2000 [computer file]

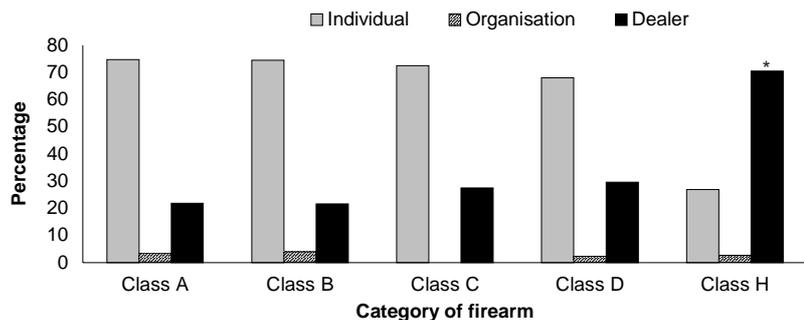
Figure 5: Type of firearm stolen in South Australia, 1994–95 to 1999–2000



* This includes the Peterborough incident where approximately 600 handguns were stolen from one dealer.

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, National Firearms Monitoring Program, 1994–95 to 1999–2000 [computer file]

Figure 6: Type of firearm stolen by type of owner in South Australia, 1994–95 to 1999–2000



* This includes the Peterborough incident where approximately 600 handguns were stolen from one dealer.

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, National Firearms Monitoring Program, 1994–95 to 1999–2000 [computer file]

period were handguns. “Other firearms” (which includes cases where type of firearm was not included in the police offence report) accounted for 10 per cent of the firearms stolen in Australia. The least frequently stolen firearms were air rifles, accounting for only five per cent of stolen firearms. Despite yearly fluctuations, the trend in type of firearm stolen has remained consistent over the six-year period.

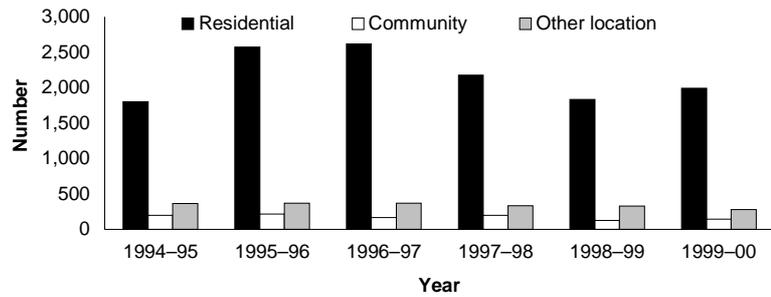
There were few differences between the jurisdictions as to the type of firearm most commonly stolen. Rifles were the most common type stolen across all jurisdictions, with the exception of Victoria, where it was “other firearms”. It should be noted, however, that this was due to “type of firearm” being unknown in many cases. Most handguns were reported stolen from New South Wales or Queensland.

The majority of firearms stolen from South Australia during the six-year period were Category A firearms,³ with the exception of 1995–96 and 1999–2000 when there was a sharp increase in the number of Category H (handguns) reported stolen (Figure 5).

Additional information provided by the South Australian Firearms Branch as to the type of owner and firearm classification indicates that Category A, B, C and D firearms were most likely to be stolen from an individual (about 73%), and least likely from an organisation (Figure 6). In contrast, Category H firearms (handguns) were more likely to be stolen from a dealer (71%), with 27 per cent of handguns in South Australia stolen from an individual.

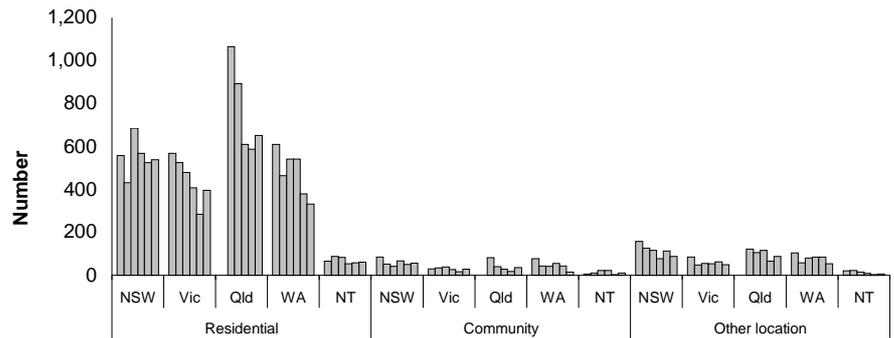
Yearly trends in South Australia indicate that while there has been an observed decline in the number of Category A, B, C, and D firearms stolen from individuals, dealers or organisations, the number of Category H firearms (handguns) stolen from all types of owners has increased, especially in the latest year where data were available. For example, in 1998–99, 73 Category H firearms were reported stolen from individuals, none from an organisation, and 60 from dealers in South Australia. In contrast, in 1999–2000, 269 Category H firearms were reported stolen from individuals, 45 from organisations, and 1,019 from dealers (600 in a single incident).

Figure 7: Stolen firearms by type of location



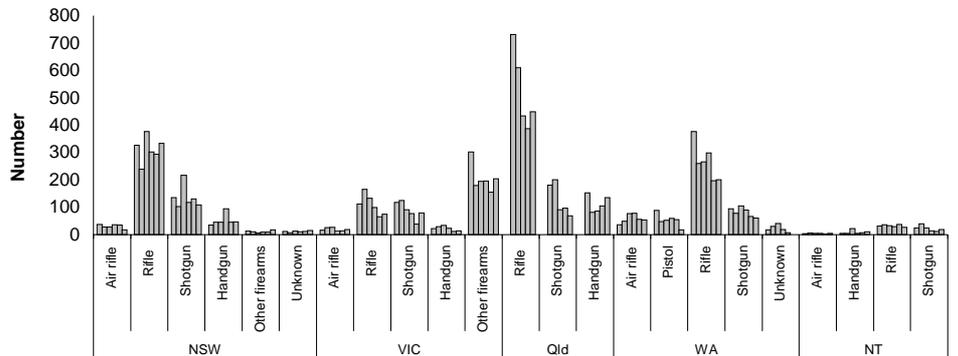
Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, National Firearms Monitoring Program, 1994–95 to 1999–2000 [computer file]

Figure 8: Stolen firearms by type of location and jurisdiction, 1994–95 to 1999–2000



Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, National Firearms Monitoring Program, 1994–95 to 1999–2000 [computer file]

Figure 9: Type of firearms stolen from a residential location by jurisdiction, 1994–95 to 1999–2000



Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, National Firearms Monitoring Program, 1994–95 to 1999–2000 [computer file]

Location of Firearms Theft

The situation overseas suggests that the most common target for the theft of firearms is a residential location (see Cook & Ludwig 1997; Corkery 1994). This is consistent with the pattern observed in Australia. The majority of firearms stolen in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory between 1 July 1994 and 30 June 2000 were stolen from a residential location, usually a dwelling (81%) (Figure 7). A further 13 per cent of firearms were stolen from some “other location” such as a retail, agricultural, recreational, manufacturing or banking setting. Only seven per cent of firearms

were stolen from a location classified as “community”. This includes educational, health, transport, justice, open space, street/footpath and religious locations.

Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia all experienced dramatic declines from 1994–95 onwards in the number of firearms reported stolen from residential premises (Figure 8). For example, the number of firearms reported stolen in Queensland declined from 1,064 in 1995–96 to 651 in 1999–2000. While there was an overall decline in the number of firearms reported stolen in New South Wales, information for a total of 1,963 firearms stolen between 1994–95 and 1996–97 did not indicate the location of the firearms theft.

Given that the majority of firearms are stolen from residential premises (81%), the following discussion examines each of the five jurisdictions where location data were available in order to determine whether there are any jurisdictional differences in the type of firearm stolen, and the location of the theft. Based on data where the location of the theft was recorded, in New South Wales it appears all types of firearms were most commonly stolen from a residential premise. Also, since 1996–97, the number of rifles and shotguns reported stolen from a residential premise has declined (Figure 9).

Trends analysis in Victoria is quite difficult given the large number of firearms classified as “other” (encompassing “firearm”, “gun” and “other firearm”). During the period under analysis, the theft of rifles, shotguns and handguns from all locations has declined in Victoria. In contrast, since 1995–96 the number of “other firearms” stolen, especially from residential premises, has remained stable at about 200 per year. Again, the theft of handguns from a residential premise has declined from 22 reported thefts in 1994–95 to 14 in 1999–2000 (Figure 9).

While the theft of rifles and shotguns from a residential premise has decreased over time in Queensland, the number of handguns reported stolen appears to have increased over the same period. In 1996–97, 81 handguns were reported stolen from a residential premise. In 1999–2000 this increased to 135 (Figure 9). All other locations recorded declines in the theft of handguns.

Compared to 1994–95, there were fewer thefts of all types of firearms from all locations in 1999–2000 in Western Australia. In 1994–95, there were 88 pistols reported stolen from a residential premise, compared to 17 in 1999–2000 (Figure 9). Similarly, 33 pistols were stolen from a community location, the majority of which were recorded stolen from a workshop. In 1999–2000 there were no reports of a stolen pistol from a community setting. Interestingly, in 1997–98, 38 pistols were recorded stolen from a shopping centre (26 from a safe, 11 from a shop display, and one from some other place). Of the 475 pistols stolen in Western Australia between 1994–95 and 1999–2000,

only 31 (7%) were stolen from a safe (data do not indicate whether the safes were unlocked at the time of the thefts).

The number of firearms reported stolen in the Northern Territory is relatively small compared to the other jurisdictions. There were, on average, less than 100 firearms stolen annually between 1994–95 and 1999–2000. The number of firearms reported stolen has declined from 119 in 1996–97 to 76 in 1999–2000 (Figure 9).

The Extent of Firearms Ownership in Australia

Previous estimates of the number of firearms in Australia were based on national surveys. For example, the NewsPoll group undertook a national survey in June and July 1997. Based on the results of that survey, it was estimated that 1.2 million Australian adults owned firearms and that there were approximately 2.5 million firearms in private ownership (Williams 1997). However, since the introduction of the national firearms licensing and registration system, it is now possible to accurately identify the number of firearms licence-holders as well as the number of legally registered firearms in Australia.

As of 1 July 2001, there was a total of 764,518 “individual” firearms licence-holders,⁴ and 2,165,170 registered firearms⁵ in Australia (Table 1). Queensland had the highest number of firearms licence-holders, followed by Victoria and New South Wales. In all jurisdictions, with the exception of the ACT, licence-holders each owned, on average, approximately three registered firearms (Table 1).

On a population basis, approximately five per cent of the total Australian adult population (persons aged 18 years and older) hold a current firearms licence (Table 1). This proportion varies from state to state, with Tasmania recording the highest proportion of licence holders per capita (12%), followed by the Northern Territory (10%), and Queensland (7%). In contrast, only two per cent of the adult population in the ACT have a current firearms licence.

Directions for Policy

The most obvious policy question raised by this report is “How can we reduce the number of firearms stolen yearly, and reduce the possibility of stolen firearms contributing to the pool of illegally held firearms in Australia?” Currently there are over two million registered firearms in Australia, and less than one per cent of these are stolen annually. While the proportion seems quite low, in terms of quantity this still means that an average of over 4,000 legal firearms are stolen annually in Australia; most importantly, there is the possibility that at least some of these are being transferred into the illegitimate firearms market.⁷

Included in the NFA were provisions for the security and storage of firearms. These provisions require Licence Category A and B firearms be stored in a locked receptacle constructed of either hardwood or steel, and that Licence Category C, D and H firearms be stored in a locked, steel safe that is bolted to the structure of the building; all ammunition must be stored in locked containers separate from any firearms. While information is

Table 1: Number of licence holders and registered firearms by jurisdiction, 1 July 2001

Jurisdiction	Individual licence-holders	Registered firearms	No. reg. firearms per individual	Licence-holders as % of adult pop.*
NSW	171,873	516,468	3	3.5
Qld	186,884	506,354	3	6.9
Vic.	183,370	485,727	3	5.0
WA	84,829	245,322	3	5.9
SA	77,513	249,327	3	6.7
Tas.	41,367	117,646	3	11.8
ACT	5,501	6,494	1	2.3
NT**	13,181	37,832 ***	3	9.6
Australia	764,518	2,165,170	3	5.2

* Resident adult population (ABS 2001).

** As at 29 October 2001.

*** Figure includes firearms registered to corporate (business) licences, collectors, clubs and museums.

Source: State and territory police services’ firearms branches.

not available to determine how many of the stolen firearms were stored and secured correctly, it is important to emphasise the need for firearms owners, as well as dealers, to store their firearms according to the set regulations.

The enforcement of safe storage requirements was examined in a review of the New South Wales *Firearms Act 1996* (Tee 2000, paragraphs 159–65). The review suggested the need for an enforcement program and that such a regime would need to be coordinated by the Firearms Registry, with random inspections performed on an ongoing basis by:

- local police;
- a registry auditing team; or
- a specialised auditing team.

Given that there are currently just over 760,000 firearms licence-holders in Australia, it would seem an arduous and resource-intensive task to undertake random inspections of even some of the licence-holders; however, “it is vital that a continuing enforcement regime be established” (Tee 2000, p. 133). While the main function of such an enforcement regime would be to ensure compliance of safe storage requirements by firearms licence-holders, other benefits would also be gained from the establishment of this regime. It would enable data to be gathered on:

- rates of compliance and non-compliance, including variations between jurisdictions, urban versus rural, and so on;
- the most common breaches of safe storage regulations; and
- reasons associated with non-compliance.

This information would assist in determining the level of compliance, and ways in which greater compliance could be achieved.

While we can quantify the number of firearms officially reported stolen to police, there is little information available to determine what proportion of the 4,000 firearms stolen annually are then subject to trading within a black market environment, or even used to commit crime. Until such information becomes available, we cannot assess the contribution that stolen firearms make as a source of illegal firearms in Australia. However, it is important to note that there has been a downward trend in the number of firearms reported stolen in Australia. This is

a positive indication that the stringent storage requirements introduced through legislative reforms are producing the desired effect, and reducing the number of firearms targeted by thieves.

Data Source

A written request was made to each state and territory police service in Australia in 2001 to obtain data on the number, type and location of firearms stolen, as well as the number of individuals who had a firearms licence and the number of registered firearms as of 1 July 2001.

Notes

- 1 Firearms are grouped into the following categories: handguns (air pistol, blank fire pistol, pistol, revolver, starting pistol); air rifles; rifles (tranquillising rifle, rifle); shotguns (sawn-off shotgun, shotgun); other firearm (machine gun, other firearm, paintball gun, powerhead, replica firearm, and firearm not further described, “gun”). Note that data for Queensland were provided only for the following categories of firearms: rifle, shotgun and handgun.
- 2 Data on the type of firearms stolen were not available for the ACT. South Australia provided details as to the category of firearms stolen and will be discussed separately.
- 3 **Category A:** air rifles, rimfire rifles (excluding self-loading), single- and double-barrelled shotguns.
Category B: muzzle-loading firearms, single-shot, double-barrelled and repeating action centre-fire rifles, break-action shotguns/rifle combinations.
Category C: (prohibited except for occupational purposes) self-loading rimfire rifles with a magazine capacity no greater than 10 rounds, self-loading shotguns with a magazine capacity no greater than five rounds, pump-action shotguns with a magazine capacity no greater than five rounds.
Category D: (prohibited except for official purposes) self-loading centre-fire rifles, self-loading shotguns, and pump action shotguns with a capacity of more than five rounds, self-loading rimfire rifles with a magazine capacity greater than 10 rounds.
Category H: (restricted) all handguns, including air pistols.
- 4 Excludes firearms licences for dealers and other businesses.
- 5 Firearms registered to individuals only; excludes firearms registered to dealers and other businesses/organisations.
- 6 As at mid-year population (ABS 2001).
- 7 Specific information about what happens to firearms once stolen is not available, although it is reasonable to infer that at least some of the 4,000 firearms stolen enter the illegitimate firearms market, given that research suggests few firearms used in homicide in Australia are legally held (see Mouzos 2000). Similarly, most firearms used in the commission of crime are either rifles or shotguns (see Mouzos 2000, 2001; Mouzos & Carcach 2001). In recent years there has been a significant increase in the use of handguns in crime, especially in New South Wales. However, there has not been a subsequent increase in the number of handguns stolen (251 in 1995–96 compared to 209 in 1999–2000).

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