

Australian Firearms Legislation and Unintentional Firearm Deaths: A Theoretical Explanation for the Absence of Decline Following the 1996 Gun Laws

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Executive Summary:

Background

- Australia's gun controls are considered among the most stringent in the developed world.
- The National Firearms Agreement (NFA) of 1996 prohibited semi-automatic rifles and semi-automatic and pump-action shotguns.
- A number of recent published papers have shown the NFA may have reduced firearm suicides, but had no impact on other types of firearm-related death.
- The downwards trend in unintentional firearm deaths did not continue post-reforms.
- Deaths recorded in that category rose.

Observations

- It has been suggested that the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), a primary data source, 'under-counts' injury deaths, including suicides, and may 'over-count' unintentional deaths.
- ABS publications note that:

“In relation to suicide, there has been an increase in recent years in the number of open coroners' cases. Where cases are not finalised and the findings are not available to the ABS in time for publication of causes of death statistics, deaths are coded to other accidental, ill-defined or unspecified causes rather than suicide. The causes of death statistics are not revised once a coronial enquiry is finalised.”
- According to De Leo (2007), ABS data 'under-counted' overall suicides by more than 125 cases in one year, in one Australian state (Queensland) alone.

Theoretical Explanations

- An undisclosed number of firearm-related deaths classified as unintentional in recent years may have been later determined as suicides.
- This would not be reflected in available data, where such instances would continue to be statistically represented as unintentional deaths.
- Unintentional firearm related deaths may be lower than recorded.
- The true incidence of firearm suicide may therefore be higher than ABS data show.

Recommendations and Conclusions

- ABS data should be cross-checked against finalised coronial data, and updated.
- If ABS records are not accurate, the decline in firearm suicide post-NFA may be less pronounced than ABS-supplied data have indicated.
- Until data quality issues can be resolved, conclusions cannot be drawn about the impact of legislative change on unintentional firearm-related deaths or firearm suicides.
- Australian observations are used to support proposals that gun laws reduce firearm suicides. This contention requires increased scrutiny.
- The need for accurate data is paramount if Australia is to provide a valid case study for evidence-based public health and safety decisions at the international level.