



5 NOVEMBER 2007

**Open Letter To: The Hon. John Howard, Prime Minister of Australia
Mr Kevin Rudd, Leader of the Opposition**

In 1996, at an estimated cost of around half a billion dollars, Australia introduced gun laws that are considered among the most stringent in the developed world.

11 years later, an increasing body of research demonstrates that those laws have not delivered upon their promise of a 'safer Australia'¹.

The Australian Institute of Criminology, through their National Homicide Monitoring Program Annual Reports, consistently show that the overwhelming majority of firearm homicides are committed by unlicensed persons using illegally held firearms².

The number of registered firearms stolen each year represents approximately 0.06% of all legally owned firearms in Australia³. In 2004-2005, just seven incidents of theft were later associated with a crime, equating to 0.0006% of all registered firearms.

Independent published studies using different statistical methods have produced the same results^{4,5}. The pre-existing downward trend in firearm homicide did not change after the 1996 bans and buyback. It continued to fall at the same rate as it had before 1996.

Firearm suicides account for around 80% of firearm-related deaths in Australia (under 10% of all suicides). The pre-1996 rate of decline accelerated post-1996. However, non-firearm suicides also began falling in the late 1990's, after years of increases.

It is therefore difficult to separate out any effects of the gun laws from those brought about by wider social changes, so caution is needed when drawing conclusions. The declines also coincide with increased attention to the vital role of mental healthcare and support services for those in need, as well as the introduction of national suicide prevention strategies.

Regarding mass shootings, the absence of a rare event does not provide evidence for prevention. Like Australia, New Zealand has not experienced a mass shooting in over 10 years. Unlike Australia, licensed New Zealanders still use, for hunting and target shooting, the types of firearms that Australia used taxpayer dollars to destroy.

Where social inequality and disadvantage flourish, so too does violence. Focussing on legal firearms ownership is a reaction, not a solution. It is time for a different approach. We ask you to look to the future and avoid the pitfall of using 'tough gun laws' as a substitute for social responsibility.

In England, where handguns are banned yet still used by troubled youths in fatal crimes, psychotherapists observe that reducing social exclusion and deprivation may be more effective than gun control⁶. We urge you to take these words to heart.

Yours Sincerely,

Dr Samara McPhedran

On behalf of The International Coalition for Women in Shooting and Hunting (WiSH)

www.ic-wish.org

1. Howard, J.W. (1996). Funding of gun 'buy back' scheme. Press Release, 14 May.

2. See for example Mouzos, J., & Houliaras, T. (2006). *Homicide in Australia 2004-2005 National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP) Annual Report*. Research and Public Policy Series, No. 72. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology.

3. Borzycki, M., & Mouzos, J. (2007). *Firearms Theft in Australia 2004-05*. Research and Public Policy Series, No.73. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology.

4. Baker, J., & McPhedran, S. (2007). Gun laws and sudden death: Did the Australian firearms legislation of 1996 make a difference? *British Journal of Criminology*, 47. 455-469.

5. Chapman, S., Alpers, P., Agho, K., & Jones, M. (2006). Australia's 1996 gun law reforms: faster falls in firearm deaths, firearm suicides, and a decade without mass shootings. *Injury Prevention*, 12: 365-372.

6. Adshead, G., Fonagy, P., & Sarkar, S.P. (2007). Violence and gun crime. *British Medical Journal*, 335. 837.