

Hunters and collectors

Gun use and ownership in Australia

The number of hunters, sporting shooters and licensed gun owners has fallen over the last 20 years. Despite this, the number of firearms in Australia has increased. There are fewer gun owners, but they are buying more guns.

Discussion paper

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Commissioned by Gun Control Australia Inc

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Summary and introduction

In the past twenty years, the number of gun owners and sporting shooters has declined, despite an increasing population.

The share of the population participating in shooting sports has more than halved, from 0.7% to 0.3% between 1995-96 and 2013-14. The number of licensed gun owners has fallen by a third, which corresponds to a more than 40% decrease in gun owners as a share of population.

Despite this, the number of firearms in Australia is higher now than it was in 1997, even accounting for population. In 1997, there were 2.1 guns per owner; there are now 3.9 guns per owner.

This has significant implications for the gun industry. If the ratio of guns per owner had remained at its 1997 rate, there would have been just 1.70 million guns in Australia by 2016 – or 1.45 million fewer guns. The cultural change of keeping more guns has been tremendously profitable for the gun lobby. Using a rough measure of a gun selling for \$1,000, the gun lobby has sold an additional \$1.45 billion worth of guns because of the cultural change since 1997 of keeping more guns.

RECOMMENDATIONS

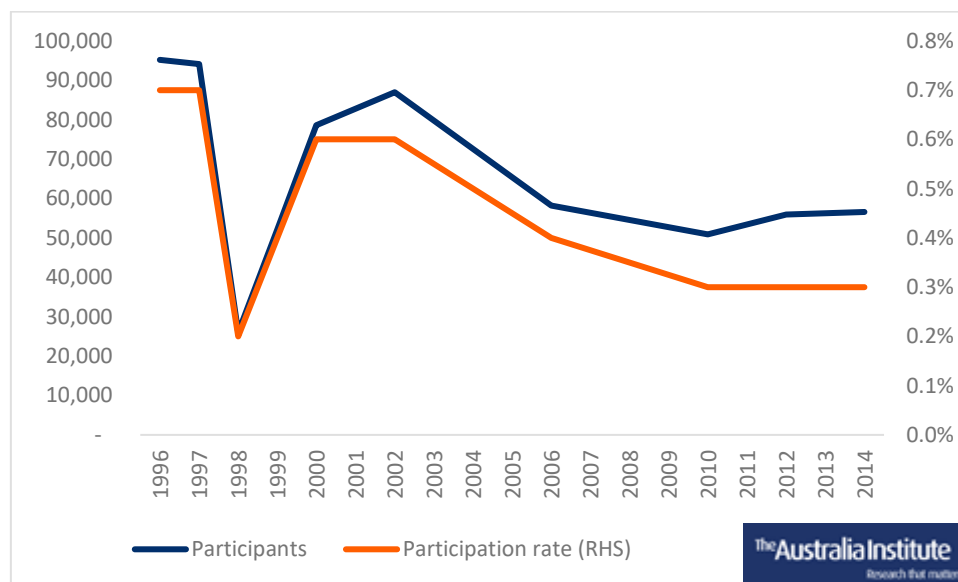
1. States and territories should consider placing a cap on the number of firearms that a licensed gun owner is entitled to own. At the very least, New South Wales should abide by the National Firearms Agreement requirement that each gun after the first requires its own justification.
2. The government should fund either the Australian Bureau of Statistics or the Australian Institute of Criminology to collect and release quarterly firearms data. This data should include the number of licensed guns; the number of licensed gun owners; the number, variety and origin of guns used in crime; the number, type and nature of gun thefts; and the distribution of gun ownership across Australia.

Other recommendations appear in our earlier report, *Point blank: Political strategies of Australia's gun lobby*.

Who shoots?

Participation in shooting sports has been in decline for at least the past two decades. The data is choppy because of low participation rates (around 0.3% in 2013-14, representing 0.5% of men and 0.0% of women), but between 1995-96 and 2013-14 we see a fall of 40% in the number of participants. Taking Australia's population increase into account, the participation rate has more than halved, from 0.7% in 1995-96 to 0.3% in 2013-14.

Figure 1: Participation in shooting sports



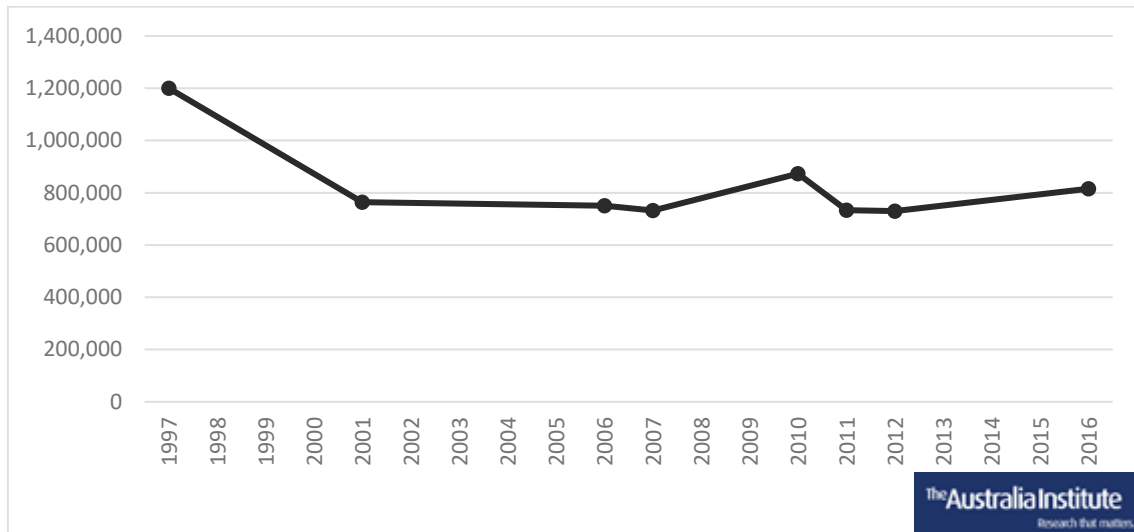
Source: ABS (2014) *Participation in Sport and Physical Recreation*, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4177.0>

Unfortunately, estimates of the number of hunters are less frequent. In 2014, academics Finch, Murray, Hoy and Baxter estimated the number of hunters at a likely 300,000, which is well down from the estimate from Bauer and Giles in 2002 of around 900,000 hunters.¹ These numbers are rough and do not use the same methodology, but nonetheless suggest a decline in hunting at least commensurate with the decline in shooting sports participation.

There has been a similar decline in the number of licensed firearm owners, which has fallen from 1.2 million to 0.8 million in the two decades between 1997 and 2016.

¹ Finch, Murray, Hoy, & Baxter (2014) *Expenditure and motivation of Australian recreational hunters*

Figure 2: Licensed firearm owners



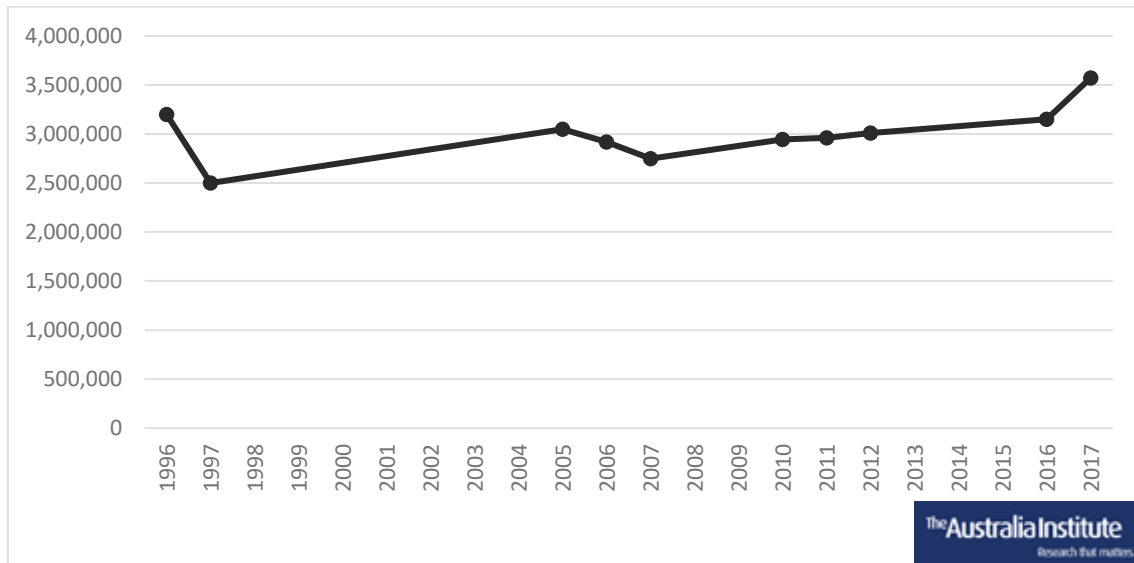
Source: GunPolicy.org (2019) *Guns in Australia — Firearms, gun law and gun control*, <https://www.gunpolicy.org/firearms/region/australia>; Petrie (2006) *A disarming cause*, <https://www.theage.com.au/technology/a-disarming-cause-20060428-ge27lv.html>

Note: Without consistent reporting of firearm ownership by the government, statistics on licensed firearm owners must be collected from a variety of locations. The Australian Institute of Criminology in a 2006 slideshow presentation gave an unusually low figure of 478,326 licensed firearm owners; we have instead used an article in *The Age* that year which gives the figure of “more than 750,000” licence holders, which would be more in-line with figures from other years.² GunPolicy.org uses the 478,326 figure instead.

Given the fall in the number of licensed firearm owners, we would expect to see a proportionate drop in the number of privately owned firearms in Australia. Instead, the number of firearms is higher than it was in 1997: up from 2.5 million in 1997 to 3.6 million in 2017. This also exceeds the number of firearms before the 1996 National Firearms Agreement (3.2 million).

² Mouzos (2006) *An overview of firearms theft in Australia*, https://web.archive.org/web/20060615000000/http://www.firearmsafetyseminar.org.nz/_documents/Mouzos_Presentation.ppt; Petrie (2006) *A disarming cause*, <https://www.theage.com.au/technology/a-disarming-cause-20060428-ge27lv.html>

Figure 3: Privately owned firearms

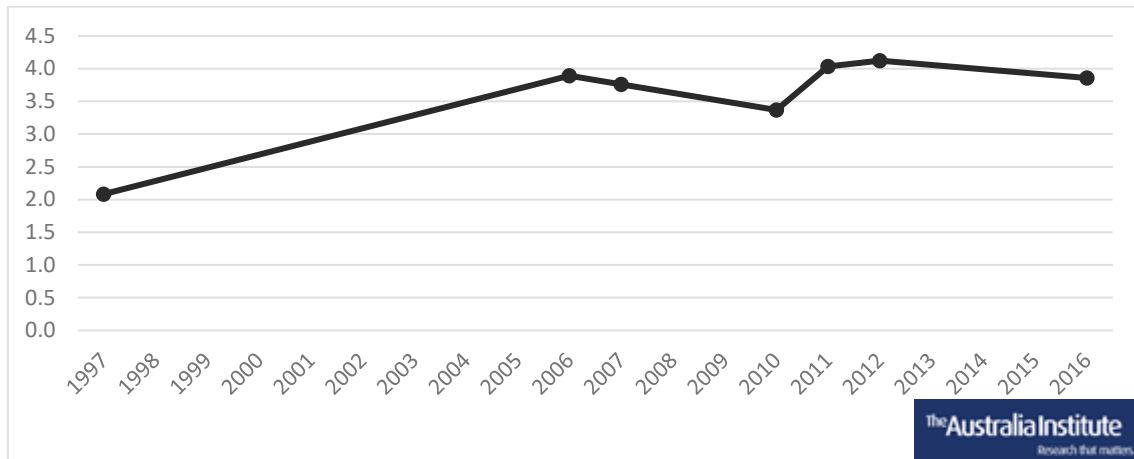


Source: GunPolicy.org (2019) *Guns in Australia — Firearms, gun law and gun control*; Small Arms Survey (n.d.) *Civilian Firearms Holdings, 2017*, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/home.html>

If there are fewer shooters and fewer firearms owners but more guns, it stands to reason that there must be more guns per gun owner. Our calculations show that in 1997, the rate of gun ownership was 2.1 guns per owner, whereas in 2019 it is now 3.9 guns per owner. This has significant implications for the gun industry. If Australia had kept the ratio of 2.1 guns per owner, there would have been just 1.70 million guns in 2016 – 1.45 million fewer guns. Using a rough measure of a gun selling for \$1,000, the gun lobby has sold an additional \$1.45 billion worth of guns because of the cultural change since 1997 of keeping more guns.

Fewer people use guns for recreation or work, but the number of guns still rises – which benefits the gun lobby.

Figure 4: Guns per owner



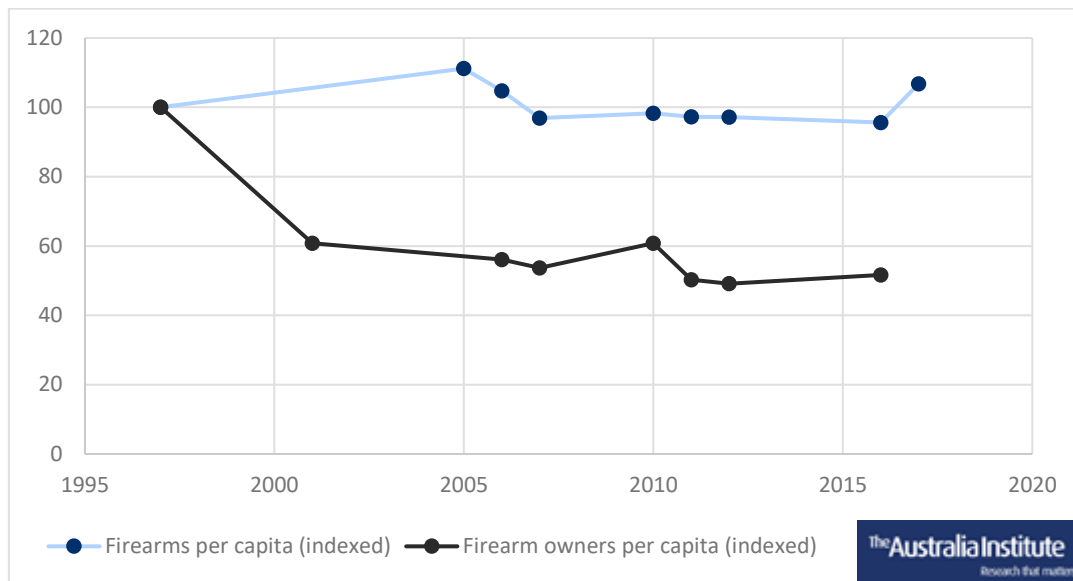
Source: GunPolicy.org (2019) *Guns in Australia — Firearms, gun law and gun control*

The combined data shows that the number of guns in Australia is climbing even as the number of gun owners is well below where it was in 1997. The number of firearm owners as a percentage of population remains half that of what was in 1997, post-National Firearms Agreement. However, firearm owners have bought enough additional guns that the number of firearms as a percentage of population is higher now than it was in 1997.

The US has observed a similar trend of fewer people owning more guns, although the fall in gun owners is much less pronounced.³

³ Beckett (2016) *Gun inequality: US study charts rise of hardcore super owners*, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/sep/19/us-gun-ownership-survey>

Figure 5: Firearms per capita and licensed owners per capita (indexed to 1997)



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2019) *Population*, <http://www.abs.gov.au/Population>; GunPolicy.org (2019) *Guns in Australia — Firearms, gun law and gun control*

Firearm owners appear to be acquiring firearms that are surplus to their requirements. Why do hunters and sporting shooters require twice as many guns each as they did 20 years ago?

ILLICIT GUNS

Where possible, our firearms data includes both licit and illicit firearms in civilian possession (but not those in government hands, either military or law enforcement). The most recent Australian government figures that split licit and illicit firearms are from 2016, when the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission reported there were 2.9 million legally registered firearms and an estimated 260,000 firearms in the domestic illicit market, totalling 3.2 million firearms in civilian possession.⁴

Calculating the number of illicit firearms is difficult. Estimates collated by GunPolicy.org report between 250,000 and 270,000 unregistered and illicit firearms in Australia between 2006 and 2016.⁵ If correct, this shows that Australia has performed well in keeping firearms out of criminal hands: the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime rule of thumb is that the number of firearms in the illicit market is 10–20% the

⁴ ACIC (2016) *Illicit firearms in Australia*, pp. 7, 27, <https://www.acic.gov.au/publications/intelligence-products/illicit-firearms-australia-report>

⁵ GunPolicy.org (2019) *Guns in Australia — Firearms, gun law and gun control*, <https://www.gunpolicy.org/firearms/region/australia>

number of firearms in the licit market.⁶ 260,000 is 9% of the number of firearms in Australia's licit market as of 2016. It is also worth noting that since those estimates were made, the 2017 gun amnesty resulted in 51,000 unregistered firearms being destroyed or registered.⁷

Estimates of illicit firearms in Australia made by the firearms lobby are sometimes much higher than the figures from government sources. In 2011, the International Coalition for Women in Shooting and Hunting estimated that there were between 1.5 and six million unregistered firearms in Australia.⁸ In 2018, the Shooters Union estimated that there were probably two to three million unregistered and illegal firearms in Australia.⁹

⁶ ACIC (2016) *Illicit firearms in Australia*, p. 7; UNODC (n.d.) *The globalization of crime - A transnational organized crime threat assessment*, p. 129, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/tocta-2010.html>

⁷ Butler (2017) *One-Fifth Of Australia's Illegal Guns Taken Off Streets In Just Three Months*, https://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/2017/10/05/one-fifth-of-australias-illegal-guns-taken-off-streets-in-just-three-months_a_23234503/

⁸ WISH (2011) *Firearms Registration in Australia*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20161223224040/http://www.ic-wish.org/WiSH%20Fact%20sheet%20Firearms%20registration%20in%20Australia.pdf>

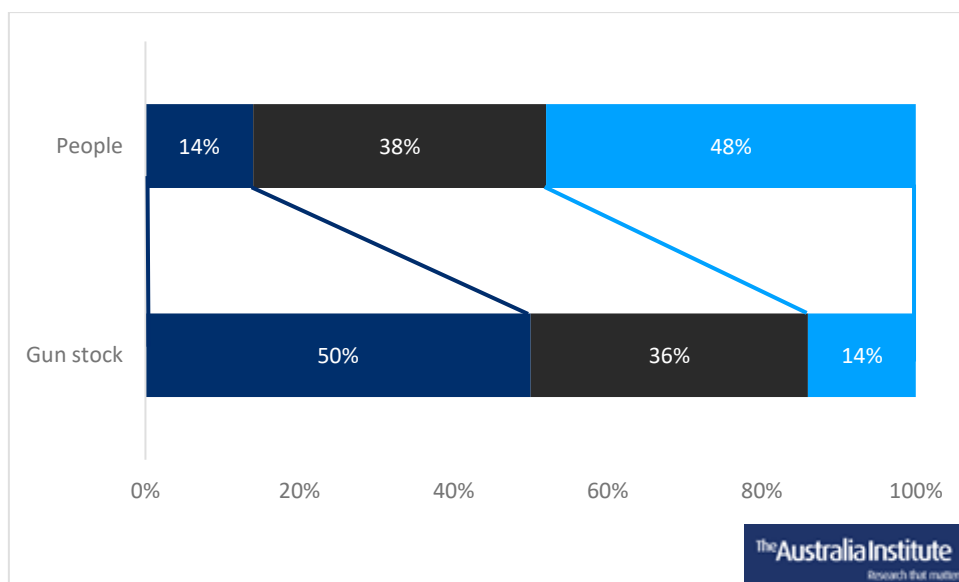
⁹ The Unshackled (2018) *Waves Ep. 198 Gun Politics in Australia*, sec. 37:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRacLTzDQo>

United States data

In the US, 14% of the population owns half of the guns, and half of the population owns 14% of the guns,¹⁰ as shown in Figure 6 below.

If a similar trend exists in Australia, then using the conservative 2016 figures from the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission of 3.2 million firearms in Australia, 114,420 owners would own 1.6 million guns (about 14 guns per owner) and 408,000 owners would own 441,000 guns (about one gun per owner). The remaining 310,080 owners would own 1.1 million guns (about four guns per owner). If the 114,420 “accumulators” limited themselves to five guns each instead of 14 guns each, there would be 1,028,160 fewer guns in Australia.¹¹

Figure 6: Gun ownership in the USA



Source: Deborah Azrael, Lisa Hepburn, David Hemenway, & Matthew Miller (2017) *The Stock and Flow of U.S. Firearms: Results from the 2015 National Firearms Survey*

¹⁰ Deborah Azrael, Lisa Hepburn, David Hemenway, & Matthew Miller (2017) *The Stock and Flow of U.S. Firearms: Results from the 2015 National Firearms Survey*

¹¹ The number of firearms would be higher if the 2017 figures from the Small Arms Survey were used, but that survey does not estimate the number of firearms owners. As such, we have used 2016 figures where estimates of both firearms and firearm owners are available.

Why accumulate guns?

Those who do not own or shoot guns might wonder why anyone would want or need more than one or two guns. Owners who have talked to journalists give a number of reasons:¹²

- They collect historic guns out of historical or engineering interest;
- They want a variety of guns to choose between for sport shooting;
- They are pre-emptively stocking up before anticipated bans or restrictions;
- They need guns on hand to instruct others;
- They are a gunsmith;
- They are preparing for the breakdown of civilisation;
- They enjoy customising their guns;
- They inherited several guns;
- They are serious hunters;
- They want guns in each room so they can reach them quickly if there is a home invasion; or
- They want different guns to carry with them based on their outfit and purpose for leaving the house (e.g. a different gun for going to the beach vs going to a formal event).

However, while these may explain the motivation to own several guns, it is not clear why the average gun owner in 2017 would want to own twice as many firearms as the average gun owner in 1997.

¹² Beckett (2016) *Gun inequality: US study charts rise of hardcore super owners*; (2016) *Meet America's gun super-owners – with an average of 17 firearms each*, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/sep/20/gun-ownership-america-firearms-super-owners>; Knowles & Branley (2017) *One Sydneysider, 285 guns: Weapons hoard in exclusive suburb*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-10-11/gun-data-shows-extent-of-private-arsenals-in-suburban-australia/9038350>

Conclusion

The past two decades have seen an increase in the number of registered firearms in Australia. There are more firearms in Australia today than there were in 1997 – even after accounting for population growth.

This increase has occurred despite a steep fall in the number of people engaging in sporting shooting and hunting. The number of gun owners overall has fallen. A small and falling share of the population shoot recreationally, but those that do own guns are buying almost twice as many as they did 20 years ago.