

Australian gun control: 29 years after Port Arthur

Almost 30 years after Port Arthur, there are more guns in Australia than ever before, and the Howard Government’s landmark National Firearms Agreement is falling short of its stated aims. There is no National Firearms Register and minors can use firearms in every state. Eight OECD countries have lower gun homicide rates than Australia.

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INTRODUCTION

On 28 of April 1996, one man killed 35 people and wounded another 23 with semi-automatic rifles at Port Arthur, Tasmania. It remains the deadliest massacre in modern Australian history.

Four days after the killings, then-Prime Minister John Howard promised to “significantly strengthen laws relating to gun control in Australia”.¹ This was an act of political courage; gun control was unpopular with many supporters of Mr Howard’s government.²

On 10 May, just 12 days after the massacre, the Howard Government announced the National Firearms Agreement (NFA), a suite of measures from the federal, state, and

¹ Howard (1996) *Ministerial statement on Gun Control*
<https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id:%22chamber/hansardr/1996-05-06/0089%22;src1=sm1>

² Australian Associated Press (2019) “How Howard changed Australia’s gun laws”
<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/how-howard-changed-australias-gun-laws/jdvym6bth>

territory governments designed to strengthen Australia's gun control laws. The main elements of the agreement included:

- A ban on some categories of firearms, including semiautomatic assault rifles like those used at Port Arthur³
- A temporary firearms buyback program for the newly banned weapons
- A national firearm register
- A 28-day waiting period for firearm purchases
- Tightened licencing rules (including a ban on licences for those under 18).⁴

The agreement was reconfirmed by all jurisdictions in 2017, however some of its resolutions remain unimplemented including the creation of the National Firearm Registry. Others have been implemented inconsistently across Australia's states and territories, such as under 18 firearm use, hampering their effectiveness.

Nearly thirty years later, Australia's firearm laws are not living up to the promise of the Howard Government's bravery.

³ Ramzy, Innis & Boehler (2015) "How a Conservative-Led Australia Ended Mass Killings"
<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/05/world/australia/australia-gun-ban-shooting.html>

⁴ <https://www.ag.gov.au/crime/publications/2017-national-firearms-agreement>

STATUS OF THE NATIONAL FIREARMS AGREEMENT

Firearms use by under-18s

The 1996 NFA contains provisions that licenses should only be given to those aged 18 or over, which all states reaffirmed in 2017. While all states and territories abide by this rule for ownership and storage of guns, none exclude minors from all licences. In NSW, Victoria, WA, SA, Tasmania and the ACT minors are allowed to “possess and use” firearms from the age of 12.⁵ In Queensland that’s extended to children as young as 11, and the minimum is only 10 in the NT. In the NT and NSW possession and use is limited to shooting at ranges with supervision but continues to afford access to firearms and ammunition.

Laws around minors using firearms are inconsistent even within states. In Victoria for example, a child as young as 12 may apply for and receive a gun licence that would allow them to use a firearm but would have to wait another four years to legally operate paintball gun. A child in Victoria is allowed to operate a weapon, but not a toy version of the weapon.

In most states and territories, the minimum age to use a firearm is slightly above or the same as the age of criminal responsibility. Only the ACT has a higher age of criminal responsibility (14) than minimum age for firearms (12). Under current regulations a 12-year-old’s mistake at a firing range could lead to a criminal conviction of manslaughter. In Queensland and the NT, that could happen to an 11 or 10 year old respectively, and the sentence could mean locking up that child for the rest of their life.

Where is the National Firearms Register?

One of the key reforms of the 1996 NFA was the creation of a National Firearms Register (NFR). After 29 years, the NFR still does not exist.

⁵ Clarke, Gottschalk, Chollet and Grundy (2025) *Gun Control in Australia*, pp 22-43, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/gun-control-in-australia/>

In December 2023, the National Cabinet agreed to implement a NFR within four years, a timeline gun control advocates criticised as too lengthy.⁶ In April 2024, the Federal Government committed over \$160 million to implement the register.⁷

The NFR would be a “central hub of data from each state and territory, allowing near real-time [firearms] information sharing across the country”.⁸ Since Australia has porous borders, cooperation between state and territory law enforcement is critical to ensure public safety. As the president of the Queensland Police Union, Ian Leavers said,

What I believe we need is a nationalised system which would record you being a licence holder, any weapons that you acquire, dispose of, have in your possession or that have been reported stolen [and] any offences which have been committed that relate to firearms.⁹

Each state and territory keeps its own registry, which hampers coordination between their law-enforcement bodies. Police in the ACT, for example, cannot cross-check their database with NSW’s without “either verbally checking with the New South Wales Police Force (NSWPF) or being alerted via intelligence from NSWPF”, which is resource-intensive and incurs delays.¹⁰

There were renewed calls for a National Firearms Register following a shooting in Wieambilla, Queensland in 2022. Before the shooting, law enforcement in different states allegedly did not share data, allowing one of the perpetrators to purchase ammunition in Queensland despite having a suspended licence in NSW.¹¹

⁶ Attorney-General’s Department (n.d.) National Firearms Register, <https://www.ag.gov.au/crime/drugs-and-firearms/firearms/national-firearms-register>;

Probyn & Edwards (2024) “Lethal, legal and locally made: Howard joins police push to restrict this gun nationwide” <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/lethal-legal-and-locally-made-howard-joins-police-push-to-restrict-this-gun-nationwide-20240110-p5ew7c.html>

⁷ Bovill (2024) “Federal government commits \$160 million for creation of national firearms register” <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-04-27/federal-government-commits-funding-for-firearms-register/103774904>

⁸ Bovill (2024) “Federal government commits \$160 million for creation of national firearms register” <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-04-27/federal-government-commits-funding-for-firearms-register/103774904>

⁹ Black (2022) “Australia already has a national firearms database” <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-12-24/australia-guns-national-register-police-shooting/101798486>

¹⁰ AFP response to an FOI request by the Australia Institute: Clarke, Gottschalk, Chollet and Grundy (2025) *Gun Control in Australia*, p43, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/gun-control-in-australia/>

¹¹ Black (2022) “Australia already has a national gun database – so why has a police shooting prompted calls for a new one?”, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-12-24/australia-guns-national-register-police-shooting/101798486>

Inconsistent laws

Since its inception, governments around Australia have implemented the NFA inconsistently; no jurisdiction has fully complied with the NFA's resolutions and, in some cases, legislation has been watered down to undermine the NFA.¹²

Regulatory consistency is particularly important in Australia due to large, unmonitored state borders. Australian Federal Police Association president Alex Caruana has said that “[i]f you’ve got softer laws in one state, that weakens the laws in the other states”.¹³ Inconsistent regulations, or inadequate enforcement of legislation, can make it feasible for firearm owners to take firearms acquired under more relaxed regulations in one jurisdiction, and illegally use them in other jurisdictions.¹⁴ This poses a risk to community safety. In some situations, it also puts the owners in legal peril, perhaps unknowingly.

The Wedgetail MPR308 for example, is a pump action rifle banned in NSW, Tasmania and the ACT but can be bought by shooters in all other states and territories.¹⁵ Because it is locally produced, the Federal Government cannot impose customs restrictions and its regulation is left to each state and territory.

THE NUMBER OF GUNS HAS RISEN SINCE 1996

Based on the latest available data for each state and territory, there are over four million registered, privately-owned firearms in Australia, and nearly one million firearm licences.

- There is at least one licenced firearm for every seven Australians.
- About one in 30 Australians have a firearms licence.
- NSW has the most guns, with 1,125,553 registered firearms, followed by Queensland with 1,076,140 registered firearms.
- Tasmania and the NT have the highest per capita firearm rates, with one firearm for every four people.

¹² Alpers & Rossetti (2017) *Firearm legislation in Australia 21 years after the National Firearms Agreement*

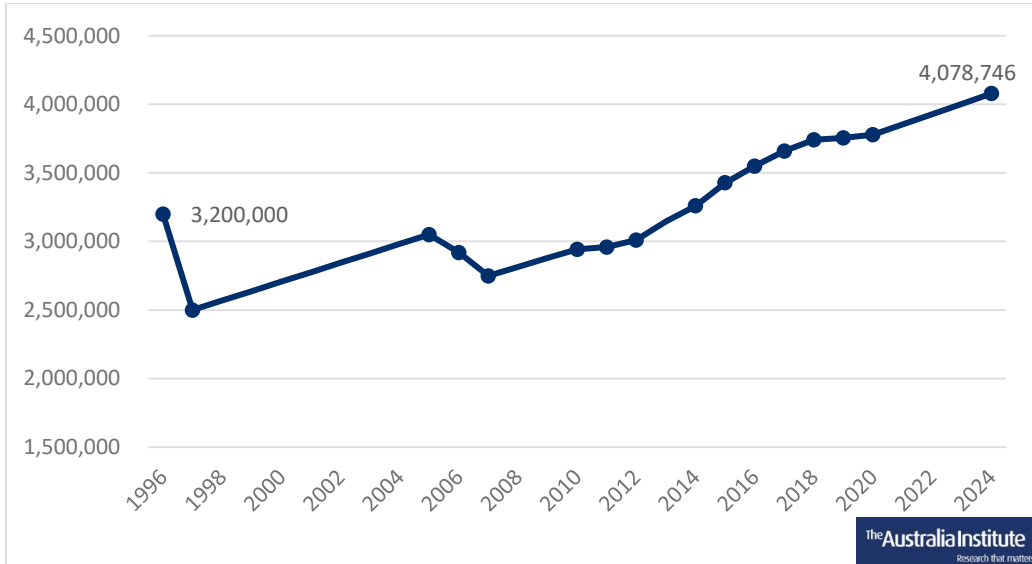
¹³ Probyn & Edwards “Lethal, legal and locally made: Howard joins police push to restrict this gun nationwide”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/lethal-legal-and-locally-made-howard-joins-police-push-to-restrict-this-gun-nationwide-20240110-p5ew7c.html>

¹⁴ Probyn & Edwards “Lethal, legal and locally made: Howard joins police push to restrict this gun nationwide”

¹⁵ Probyn and Edwards “Lethal, legal and locally made: Howard joins police push to restrict this gun nationwide”

- In every state and territory for which there is data, the average firearm licence holder owns four firearms.

Figure 1: Privately owned firearms, 1996–2024



Source: Clarke, Gottschalk, Chollet and Grundy (2025) *Gun Control in Australia*, p4

There are now more guns in Australia than before the introduction of the NFA. Following the NFA’s introduction, the number of registered firearms decreased from 3.2 million in 1996 to 2.5 million in 1997, before rising to over four million.

In 1996 the number of firearms per capita was 0.18, including illicit firearms. While this number decreased to 0.15 in 2024, a direct comparison is not possible as the 2024 figure only accounts for licenced firearms. While there are fewer licenced firearms per capita than before the introduction of the NFA, that is not counting unlicenced firearms. In the absence of comprehensive data about illegal firearms, it is not possible to know if there are fewer guns per capita overall than in 1996.¹⁶

Since 1997, there were 6,500 licenced firearm owners per 100,000 people, which decreased to 3,339 per 100,000 by 2024 (excluding ACT). Although the proportion of licenced gun owners in the general population has decreased since the introduction of the NFA, Australians who have gun licences now own a larger number of guns per person.¹⁷

¹⁶ Clarke, Gottschalk, Chollet and Grundy (2025) *Gun Control in Australia*, p3-4
<https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/gun-control-in-australia/>

¹⁷ Clarke, Gottschalk, Chollet and Grundy (2025) *Gun Control in Australia*, p3
<https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/gun-control-in-australia/>

Australian shooting advocacy bodies frequently claim that registered firearms account for only 5% of crimes committed with a firearm in Australia, meaning that the increase in number of registered firearms has little relation to crime.¹⁸ While we could not find a source for these claims, data from the Australian Institute of Criminology shows that registered firearms were used in 25% of homicide cases where the licencing status of the firearm was identified from 2011 to 2016, the most recent data available.¹⁹

Without an operational and comprehensive National Firearms Register, states and territories are far from meeting their stated commitments to the National Firearms Agreement. With more licenced firearms in the country than ever before, the time for action is now.

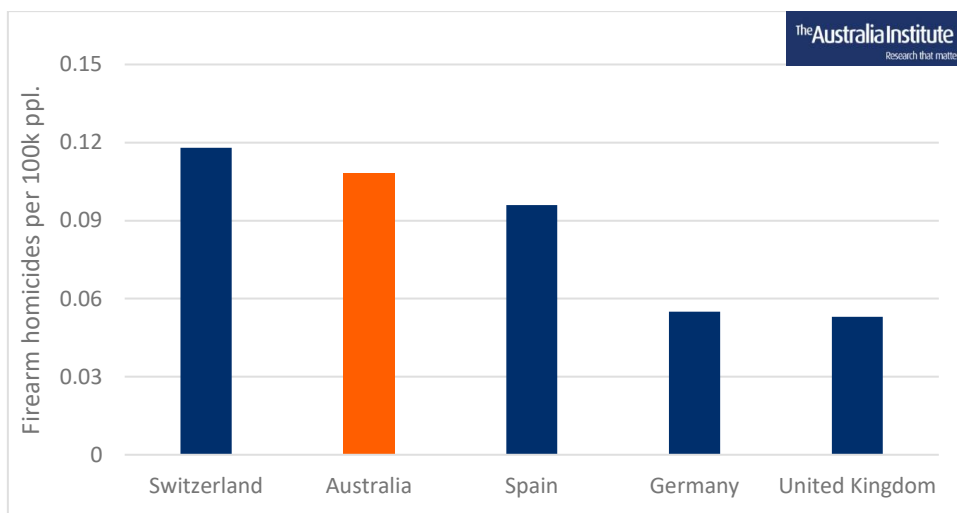
¹⁸ See for example: SSAA (2025) *"The Australia Institute's recent report distorts the reality of legal Firearms ownership in Australia"* https://www.ssaa.org.au/?ss_news=australia-institute-report-on-gun-ownership-distorts-reality

¹⁹ Australian Institute of Criminology National Homicide Monitoring Program 2011-12 to 2015-16

AUSTRALIA’S GUN DEATHS ON THE WORLD STAGE

Australia’s gun control laws frequently attract acclaim as a model for other nations to follow, especially in American debates on firearm legislation.²⁰ While Australia undoubtedly has more effective gun control measures than the United States, this does not mean that the laws or their enforcement are perfect. As seen in Figure 2, while Australia’s firearms homicide rate is low, it is not the lowest in the OECD.

Figure 2: Average firearms homicide rate 2019-2023 in select OECD countries



Source: United Nations Crime Trends Survey (UN-CTS) <https://dataunodc.un.org/>

Eight OECD countries (Spain, Slovenia, Czechia, the UK, Germany, Hungary, South Korea and Japan) have lower gun homicide rates than Australia.²¹ Switzerland is another country²² frequently used as an international example of effective gun control, and while its rate is slightly higher than Australia’s, that was driven by a sharp rise in 2022-23, with the country generally reporting lower rates than Australia before then.

²⁰ Beauchamp (2022) “Australia confiscated 650,000 guns. Murders and suicides plummeted” <https://www.vox.com/2015/8/27/9212725/australia-buyback>

²¹ United Nations Crime Trends Survey (2025), OECD countries by firearms homicide rate 2019-2023, <https://dataunodc.un.org/>

²² Temple (2021) “Analysis of Swiss Gun Control Laws and Why The US Should Adopt Them” <https://yipinstitute.org/article/analysis-of-swiss-gun-control-laws-and-why-the-us-should-adopt-them>

CONCLUSION

Nearly thirty years ago, the nation reeled after the horrific violence at Port Arthur; Australian governments leapt into action to stop it ever happening again.

The National Firearms Agreement, announced 12 days after the Port Arthur massacre, was ambitious, politically brave, and necessary for public safety. However, some of the provisions set out 29 years ago, and reaffirmed by all Australian governments eight years ago, remain unimplemented.

Australia still allows minors to hold firearm licences, still lacks a National Firearms Register, and still has inconsistent laws that make enforcement difficult. The 1996 gun buyback took 650,000 guns out of circulation, but there are now over four million registered privately owned guns in Australia: 800,000 more than before the buyback.

Australians need gun laws that live up to the Howard Government's bravery, and right now Australia does not have them.