

3. Australian Firearm Regulation and Firearm Deaths

3.1. Trends in Australian Suicides and Homicides

In the decade following the NFA, there has been a substantial drop in firearm deaths in Australia (Figures 1a and 1b). Firearm suicides have dropped from 2.2 per 100,000 people in 1995 to 0.8 per 100,000 in 2006. Firearm homicides have dropped from 0.37 per 100,000 people in 1995 to 0.15 per 100,000 people in 2006. These are drops of 65% and 59%, respectively, and among a population of 20 million individuals, represent a decline in the number of deaths by firearm suicide of about 300 and in the number of deaths by firearm homicide of about 40 per year. At the same time, the non-firearm suicide rate has fallen by 27% and the non-firearm homicide rate by 59%.⁷

It is also clear from Figure 1 that firearm deaths have been falling on a consistent basis in recent decades, while a similar trend is not as clear in the case of non-firearm deaths.⁸ Firearm deaths—both homicide and suicide—are currently at exceptionally low levels by historical standards. The previous low in the rate of firearm suicide was in 1944, at 1.63 per 100,000. The firearm suicide rate has been below that level since 1998. The firearm homicide rate is considerably more volatile, but for the years 2004 to 2007 it has been recorded as at or below 0.15 per 100,000 people. It has dipped below 0.2 per 100,000 on only one other occasion, in 1950.⁹

Non-firearm suicides, on the other hand, have remained relatively high compared to historical averages, despite declines in the early 2000s. The increase in non-firearm suicides from 1996 to 1998 is noteworthy, since some commentators (for instance, Baker and McPhedran 2007) have pointed to this as possible evidence of substitution from guns to other

7. There are concerns that data on external causes of death may be affected by changes to collection methods in 2002 (AIHW 2009), leading in particular to a decline in deaths categorized as self-harm (suicide) and an increase in deaths that are identified as due to external causes of undetermined intent.

8. Note again that there may be some inconsistencies in the homicide (death by assault) statistics after 2002. The figures for 2004 and 2005 seem exceptionally low and do not align with the justice statistics on homicides in those years. See Chapman et al. (2006). Recently released data from 2006 and 2007, however, do appear to be consistent with the figures from 2004 and 2005.

9. Again, however, this may reflect an inconsistency in the data.