

Firearm-related injuries in Western Australia Position Paper

Commitment:

Firearms continue to cause a public health issue in Western Australia (WA), due to an unacceptably high rate of firearm-related injury and fatality. Injury Matters will continue to advocate for the prevention of all injuries in WA with the aim to achieve an outcome of safer people and places.

Purpose:

To increase the target audiences;

- Awareness of the incidence of firearm-related injury in WA,
- Knowledge of current gaps in initiatives targeted towards firearm-related injury prevention, and
- Knowledge of actions that can be taken to reduce the impact of firearm-related injury in WA.

Target audience: Policymakers, government workers, law enforcement officials, local government workers, firearm regulators and firearm dealers.

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Version: One

1. Background

A firearm is any weapon which can discharge or propel a shot, bullet or other missile that can be used to cause harm.¹

Globally, Australia holds a positive reputation for its response to the Port Arthur massacre in 1996, regulating firearm ownership and reducing the number of firearm ownerships through a firearm buyback program.² The Australian Government's action to regulate firearm ownership through legislation has been recognised in significantly reducing the incidence of mass shootings,² suicide³ and homicide rates in Australia.⁴ Since 1996, there have been multiple firearm amnesty periods in Australia, with the 2017 amnesty resulting in more than 57,000 firearms being handed in for registration, sale or destruction.⁵ Since 2020, Australia has had a permanent firearms amnesty, allowing firearms to be handed into Police without repercussions to the owner.⁵

Although Australia's action against firearm use has been successful, it cannot be ignored that firearm ownership is still causing serious injury and death in Australia. In 2019 there were 35 registered deaths in WA related to firearms.⁶ Additionally, there was a 28% increase of armed robberies which involved firearms from 2018 to 2019, taking the total to 74 incidents in WA.⁷

The scope of injury from illegal firearm use can be detrimental to the health of a community and the injured individual, with physical and mental ramifications causing public health concern. Individuals who have been involved in firearm-related violence can experience long term physical and psychosocial injury.⁸

There are a number of bodies and professions responsible for reducing the incidence of firearm-related injuries including; policymakers, government workers, law enforcement officials, local government workers, firearm dealer, firearm owners and non-government organisations.⁹

The incidence of firearm-related injury can be reduced with improvements to current policy and legislation, as well as an increased awareness of the public health issue that firearms cause.¹⁰

2. Summary

Incidence of firearm-related injuries in WA:

There were 35 registered deaths related to firearms in 2019, accounting for 2.54% of all deaths due to injury.¹¹ This is an increase of 59.1% from the previous year (2018), in which there were 22 registered deaths, accounting for 1.65% of all deaths due to injury.⁶

Assault accounted for 51% (n=18) and intentional self-harm accounted for 49% (n=17) of the firearm-related fatalities in 2019.¹¹ Intentional self-harm by rifle, shotgun and larger firearm discharge was the leading identified cause of death, accounting for 31% (n=11) of all firearm-related fatalities and 415 Years of Potential Life Lost.¹¹

Nationally, the percentage of armed robberies that involved a firearm increased, with WA experiencing a higher increase than most other jurisdictions.⁷ From 2018 to 2019, there was a 28% increase in the number of armed robberies that involved a firearm in WA, with a total of 74 incidents in 2019.⁷

From 2000 to 2008, 120 people were hospitalised due to a firearm-related injury, resulting in 635 total bed days with a mean stay of 4.6 days.¹²

Firearm regulation for injury prevention:

Research shows that regulating firearm ownership and access to firearms is an effective intervention to prevent firearm-related injury and death, especially in regards to intentional harm and intentional self-harm.¹³ The 1996 National Firearms Agreement has contributed to a 61% decrease in Australia's firearm-related death rate, in comparison to the years prior to the implementation of the National Firearms Agreement.¹⁴ Findings conclude that firearm regulation significantly contributes to a decline in firearm-related injury and death, highlighting the need for strengthened regulation to improve public health.^{3,14}

Firearm legislation in WA:

Firearm ownership is restricted in WA under state legislation. The National Firearms Agreement stipulates the minimum requirements for the regulation of firearms in Australia.¹⁵ The National Firearms Agreement does not prevent jurisdictions from applying more restrictive regulations, rather it enforces the minimum requirement.¹⁵ Semiautomatic rifles and shotguns are banned in Australia and were largely reduced within the community through a Government buyback program after the Port Arthur massacre in 1996.¹⁶ It is illegal for people to carry firearms regardless of ownership, unless they are being used for occupational or recreational purposes.¹⁷

According to the WA Police, firearm owners are authorised to store their firearms in secure safes in their homes if they are following regulations regarding secure locks and alarms to prevent theft.¹⁷ However, minimal legislation exists to prevent harm from occurring when transporting firearms between recreation clubs and the owners home, meaning that firearms can be transported in cars with minimal safe storage. The Firearms Storage Requirements fact sheet, provided by the WA Police, advises that firearms are to be secured while travelling; however, no specific regulation exists to ensure this.¹⁷

Firearm regulation in WA:

Firearms are the responsibility of the State Government in Western Australia and are regulated by the WA Police Force.^{15,17} Having signed the 2017 National Firearms Agreement, the WA State Government is expected to, at minimum, comply to the agreed regulations along with other Australian States and Territories.¹⁵

In 2019, the Auditor General of Western Australia conducted an audit into the effectiveness of the WA Police Force's control and regulation of firearms.¹⁸ Issues were identified relating to the process of assessing and approving firearm licence applications. Inconsistencies were noted within the administration processes that could potentially lead to poor reliability of application outcomes. Additionally, WA Police were found to be slow in recovering firearms from deceased estates, taking an average of 150 days.¹⁸ The audit concluded with the following recommendations to improve the current regulation process;¹⁸

- An update on policies and procedures for licence application assessments.
- Implement controls in the Licencing and Registry (L&R) system to ensure that only delegated authorities can approve licences.

- Implement appropriate procedures to secure firearms from deceased estates and expired licences in a timely manner.

Acquisition of illicit firearms:

According to the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, there are a large number of illicitly owned firearms, acquired by;¹⁹

- Purchasing firearms through the grey market, which consists of firearms that were not handed in during the gun buyback policy introduced after the Port Arthur massacre in 1996,
- Stealing firearms from licenced firearm dealers and owners, and
- Illegally importing firearms from outside of Australia.

Firearm-related harm minimisation:

In addition to firearm regulation, support and educations programs are important strategies to minimise firearm-related harm.²⁰⁻²⁶ Legally obtained firearms are within the WA community and can be misused, highlighting the importance of services to support people who are at risk of firearm-related harm.^{25,26} Educational programs for firearm dealers and owners can help to minimise firearm-related harm, by reinforcing the importance of safe handling and safe storage, as well as the social services that are available to at-risk individual's.^{25,26} To obtain a firearm licence in WA, it is mandatory to complete the Safety Awareness Test and obtain a Safety Awareness Certificate from a registered firearms dealer.²⁷

Due to the involvement of firearms in incidents of suicide and violence, additional support services for the promotion of mental health and the prevention of violence will assist in the reduction of firearm-related harm.^{25,26}

3. Key Policy Statements

Injury Matters supports the need for the following actions to reduce the prevalence and impact of firearm-related injuries and fatalities in WA:

1. At a minimum, the Western Australian Government should implement legislation to comply with the 2017 National Firearms Agreement.
2. Additional regulation to be developed to reduce the acquisition of illicit firearms. For example, illegal importation of firearms in Australia.
3. Review and refine WA's firearm legislation regarding the storage and transportation of firearms outside of the firearm owner's house.
4. Action all recommendations from the Auditor General's Firearm Controls Report into the WA Police Force's control and regulation of firearms.
5. Increase the knowledge of firearm dealers and owners of the need to comply to legislations regarding firearm ownership and distribution.
6. Implement mandatory legislation for firearm dealers to provide ongoing information and education regarding firearm safety to all customers purchasing firearm related products.
7. Increase the resourcing for support programs and services that promotion of community health and the prevention of violence.

4. Injury Matters Commitment

1. Contribute to a balanced conversation about the importance of a strong firearm safety framework.
2. Collaborate with fellow stakeholders for collective action regarding compliance with the 2017 National Firearms Agreement.
3. Monitor progress and encourage WA Police regarding progress on recommendations regarding firearm licensing application assessments and ownership.
4. Engage and support the injury prevention sector and Local Governments to have the knowledge and skills to reduce fire-arm related injuries in WA.
5. Continue to advocate for the prevention of all injuries in WA with the aim to achieve an outcome of safer people and places.
6. Support the restriction of access to firearms and ammunition during periods of State of Emergency in WA.

5. Related Documents

The following documents are required to give effect to this policy;

- Council of Australian Governments, National Firearms Agreement.¹⁵
- Western Australian Auditor General, Firearm Controls Report.¹⁸
- Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, Illicit Firearms in Australia.¹⁹
- Law Reform Commission of Western Australia, Review of the Firearms Act 1973 (WA).¹

6. References

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6. Acknowledgements

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