



## Australia and Handguns: Myths and Facts

**Myth:** Handgun imports into Australia are constantly high, and are all destined for the civilian market.

**Fact: Firearm import numbers**

Legal handgun imports into Australia have increased slowly until 2001. However, when various state government contracts for replacement police service firearms are taken into account the number of legally imported handguns destined for private use appears to have declined. Longarm figures also include those firearms destined for military and police use (Figure 1).

It would assist constructive debate if commentators cited accurate figures about the number of legal imports over the last decade and a half. All Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures relate to appropriately documented imports destined for legal, approved sources. This fact, in conjunction with Australian Institute of Criminology research showing the majority of firearm homicides are committed by unlicensed persons using unregistered firearms, clearly refutes gun prohibitionists' claims that licit imports are a danger to the community.

Government authorities agree that it is impossible to estimate the number of firearms illegally smuggled into the country without being recorded by Customs or police. For example: 'Firearms Restrictions: Recent Developments', Briefing Paper No. 3/2004 for the NSW Government noted "In the 2001-2002 financial year, Australian customs authorities seized 812 illegally imported firearms including 204 handguns, nearly three times the number seized in the previous year." However, increased seizure rates do not mean that attempts at illegal import have decreased.

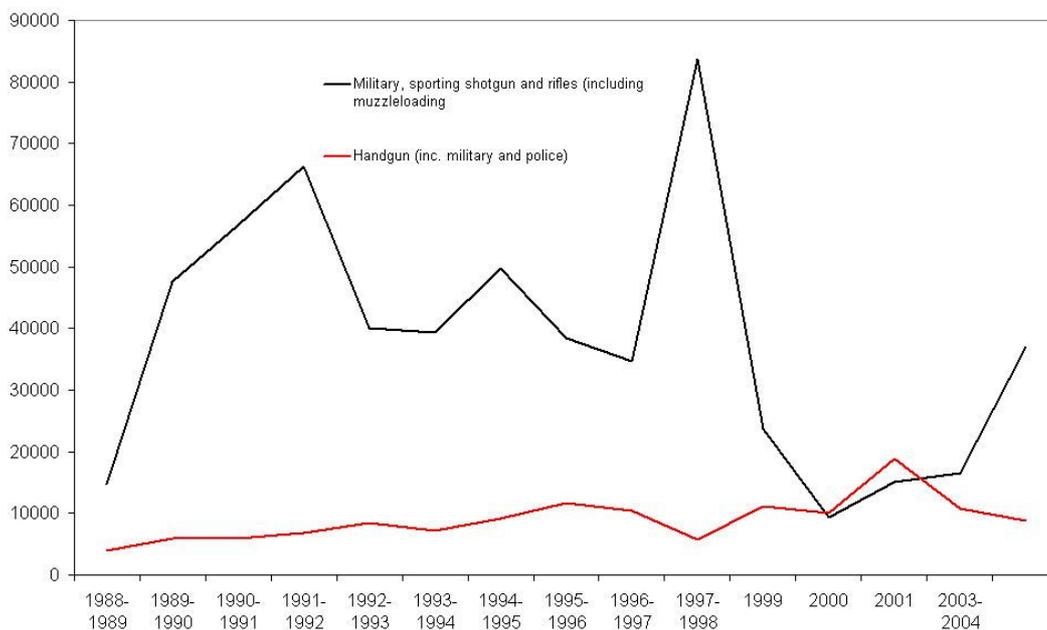


Figure 1: Firearm imports into Australia from 1988-89 to 2003-04. Note that years 1999, 2000 and 2001 are calendar not fiscal time periods.



**Myth:** Many legal imports to licenced firearms owners are subsequently diverted, deliberately or accidentally, for criminal use.

**Fact: Theft statistics**

In 2004-05, 0.06% of all registered firearms in Australia were reported stolen (1470 firearms in total). Handguns formed the lowest proportion of firearms stolen from private individuals, despite being over-represented in firearm crime.

Based on available information, handguns stolen in three incidents in 2004-05 were later used in one murder, one suicide and an armed robbery<sup>2</sup>.

This information shows the falsity of gun prohibitionists' claims that licenced civilian owners of registered firearms are the source of the unregistered firearms used in the majority of firearm crime.

It should also be noted that military and police firearms are not listed on current civilian registries, and that the number of thefts from these two sources are rarely reported publicly.

**Myth:** Handgun thefts from licenced gun owners are high, due to carelessness or deliberate avoidance of safe storage.

**Fact: Safe storage**

Secure firearm storage requirements are broadly uniform across Australian jurisdictions although there is some variation in detail. Only a small percentage of all registered firearms in Australia are stolen (e.g.: 0.06% in 2004-05<sup>3</sup>). The majority of firearms owners were recorded as complying with safe storage laws, and the majority of incidents coded as compliant recorded that the firearms had been stored in a locked safe or receptacle (92%).<sup>3</sup>

All sport shooting associations and clubs promote secure storage of firearms and this is reflected in the steadily decreasing figures for thefts from private homes.

Contrary to claims made by gun prohibitionists, government data shows that opportunistic thefts from private homes are a rare occurrence.

**Final note - Legislation**

Across all States and Territories, penalties for being in possession of an unregistered firearm are high. For example, in NSW a person who possesses an unregistered firearm in a public place and is not authorised under the *Firearms Act 1996* to possess the firearm is liable to imprisonment for 10 years. If a person is guilty of this offence and commits the offence in circumstances of aggravation then they are liable to imprisonment for 14 years.

Gun prohibitionists can continue to demand bans and restrictions, however these fail to deter the career criminal who is able to purchase an extremely expensive illegal, unregistered firearm from fellow criminals involved in smuggling drugs, people, and guns.

Severe penalties already exist for using an illegally obtained firearm, particularly if that use is in the course of another crime.

These penalties are rarely applied.

**References**

<sup>1</sup> AIC Trends and Issues 1999 No.104 International Traffic in Small Arms: An Australian Perspective

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.aic.gov.au/stats/crime/keyFacts\\_handguns.html](http://www.aic.gov.au/stats/crime/keyFacts_handguns.html)

<sup>3</sup> AIC Research and Public Policy Series No. 73 Firearms theft in Australia 2004-05