



Firearms and violent crime in New South Wales, 1995-2005

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This paper describes trends in the recorded incidence of firearm offences between 1995 and 2005 in New South Wales (NSW). The data presented here are an update of the trends in firearm offences reported in Crime and Justice Bulletin Number 57, 'Firearms and violent crime in New South Wales', which covered the period 1995 to 2000. The current analysis shows that the use of firearms in robbery offences peaked in 1997 and has since been steadily falling. Shooting offences have also declined in recent years after a peak in 2001. The rate of shooting incidents per 100,000 population is higher in Sydney than in the rest of NSW, with Fairfield-Liverpool Statistical Subdivision recording particularly high rates. The age profile of alleged offenders involved in firearms incidents has changed since 2000, with markedly fewer offenders aged 15-19 identified in connection with firearm-related incidents in 2005.

INTRODUCTION

In the first half of 2006 there were a number of shooting incidents in NSW which were widely reported in the press. In many of these cases, shots were fired into cars or houses, resulting in property damage, injury and, on occasion, death. For instance, in one tragic incident, which was apparently domestic violence related, a bullet fired from a passing car killed a woman standing near a window of her home (Sydney Morning Herald, 27 March 2006). The extensive attention that these types of offences receive in the media can give the impression that crimes involving firearms are frequent occurrences or are on the rise. The purpose of this paper is to provide statistical evidence bearing on the extent to which firearms are used in the commission of offences and the extent to which the incidence of firearm offences have varied over the last 11 years.

This paper uses data from the NSW Police's Computerised Operational Policing System (COPS) to examine the incidence of firearm-related robbery and the use of firearms as a weapon in other offences such as homicide and assault. This paper also examines the age and gender of alleged offenders who were identified by police as being involved in firearm incidents and considers changes in the age-specific rates of offending over the last five years.

Here it should be noted that while the vast majority of firearm offences would come to the attention of police, a small minority would not be reported and therefore would not be recorded in COPS. Police might also fail to record the involvement of weapons in the commission of some offences. For these reasons, the data reported in this paper would be an underestimate of the actual occurrence

of firearm crime, though trends in these offences should not be unduly affected.

THE INCIDENCE OF FIREARM OFFENCES

Table 1 shows the type of weapon used in murder, attempted murder, robbery and assault in NSW in 2005. As seen from Table 1, a weapon was used in over 70 per cent of murders in NSW, with a knife being the most common type of weapon identified (36.7%). The second most frequently recorded weapon was a firearm (20.3%). Weapons were recorded in a higher proportion of attempted murders than murders, with 80 per cent of these types of incidents reportedly involving a weapon. The most common weapon used in attempted murders was a firearm (46.0%) followed by a knife (26.0%).

Table 1: Weapons used in recorded criminal incidents of murder, attempted murder, robbery and assault, NSW, 2005

<i>Type of weapon</i>	<i>Murder victims</i>		<i>Attempted murder incidents</i>		<i>Robbery incidents</i>		<i>Assault incidents</i>	
	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Firearm ¹	16	20.3	23	46.0	488	5.9	243	0.3
Knife ²	29	36.7	13	26.0	1,777	21.5	2,279	3.2
Rock ³	0	0.0	0	0.0	29	0.4	460	0.7
Iron Bar ⁴	4	5.1	2	4.0	299	3.6	1,282	1.8
Hammer ⁵	2	2.5	0	0.0	60	0.7	128	0.2
Syringe	0	0.0	1	2.0	111	1.3	42	0.1
Glass	1	1.3	0	0.0	92	1.1	952	1.4
Other weapon	4	5.1	1	2.0	248	3.0	2,531	3.6
<i>All weapons</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>70.9</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>80.0</i>	<i>3,104</i>	<i>37.6</i>	<i>7,917</i>	<i>11.2</i>
No weapon recorded	23	29.1	10	20.0	5,149	62.4	62,580	88.8
Total	79	100.0	50	100.0	8,253	100.0	70,497	100.0

1 The weapon category firearm includes fixing guns/ramset guns, machine guns, revolvers, rifles, shotguns, spear guns and other firearms

2 The weapon category knife includes knives, swords, scissors, and screwdrivers

3 The weapon category rock includes rocks, bricks, stones and missiles

4 The weapon category iron bar includes iron bars, clubs and pipes

5 The weapon category hammer includes hammers, spanners, and wrenches

Weapon use was far less common in robbery incidents, with just over one-third of all robberies involving a weapon. Knives were the most common weapon used (21.5%), followed by firearms (5.9%), iron bars (3.6%) and other weapons (3.0%).

Only a small proportion (11.2%) of assault incidents involved a weapon. Where a weapon was recorded, knives (3.2%) were the most popular type of weapon, followed by iron bars (1.8%) and glass (1.4%). The category 'other weapon' was identified in four per cent of assault incidents. This category included 2,147 incidents (3.0% of all assault incidents) where the weapon type recorded by police was 'fists/feet/body'. However, it should be noted that many police officers may not consider fists/feet/body to be a weapon and consequently would record no weapon involvement in the assault incident. It is therefore likely that this category greatly underestimates the use of fists/feet/body in these types of offences.

TRENDS IN THE INCIDENCE OF FIREARM OFFENCES

In the next section we examine trends in the incidence of firearm offences. Three offence types are considered here; murders involving a firearm, robberies with a firearm and 'shoot with intent' incidents. Shoot with intent incidents include both 'shoot with intent to murder' (a subcategory of homicide) and 'shoot with intent other than to murder' (a subcategory of assault). Both general trends in firearm offences and trends in offences committed with a handgun are examined.

HOMICIDE INVOLVING A FIREARM

Figure 1 shows the number of murder victims killed with a handgun or another type of firearm over the last 11 years.

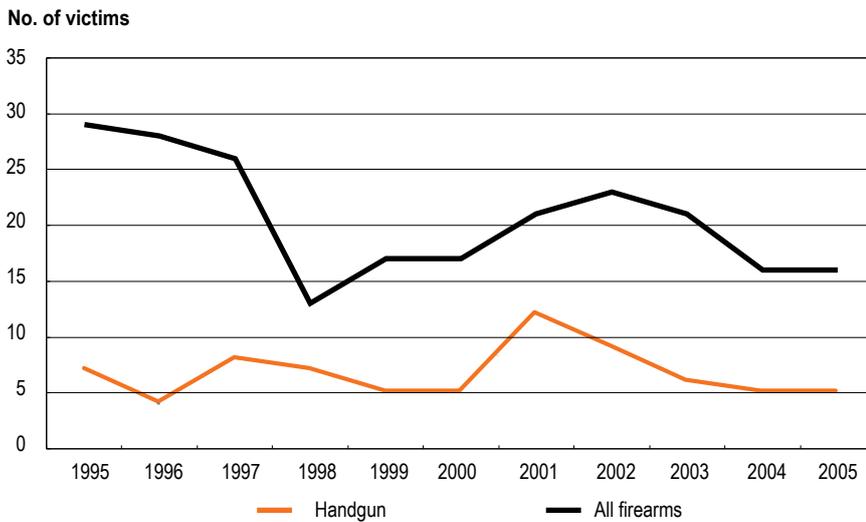
As seen from Figure 1, the number of murders with a firearm has generally decreased over the 11-year period

examined. In 1995, NSW Police recorded 29 murders with a firearm. This figure fell sharply in 1998 to just 13, before rising gradually to 23 in 2002. By 2004 and 2005, the number of recorded victims killed with a firearm was at levels similar to those recorded in 1999 and 2000.

Murders with a handgun have followed a slightly different pattern. The number of persons killed with a handgun fluctuated between four and eight in the first six years of the study period, and then peaked at 12 victims in 2001. Since 2001, however, the number of murder victims killed with a handgun has remained relatively stable at around five murders each year.

Caution is warranted when interpreting the significance of these trends, however, given that the number of people killed with a firearm each year in NSW is too small for a reliable trend test to be performed. As such year-to-year variations in the number of murders with a firearm could be random fluctuations

Figure 1: Recorded victims of murder with a firearm, and with a handgun, NSW, 1995-2005



For robbery with a handgun, the overall trend test was stable and followed a similar pattern to that observed for all robberies with a firearm. Recorded robberies with a handgun almost doubled between 1995 and 1997, rising from 315 incidents in 1995 to 628 incidents in 1997. Between 1998 and 2000, robberies with a handgun decreased slightly but then rose again in 2001 to 613 incidents. Over the last four years, the number of robberies with a handgun has decreased, with just 267 incidents recorded in 2005. This is the lowest figure recorded during the 11-year study period.

It is also worth noting that the proportion of firearm robberies committed with a handgun has increased over the last 11 years. In 1995 a handgun was used in approximately 43 per cent of robberies involving a firearm. This proportion rose to around 65 per cent of robberies in 2000 and 2002. Since 2002, the proportion of firearm robberies that involved a handgun has decreased slightly but still remains higher than the proportion recorded in 1995.

rather than indicative of an underlying trend in these offences.

ROBBERY WITH A FIREARM

Figure 2 shows the number of recorded incidents of robbery with a firearm and robbery with handgun from 1995 to 2005.¹ As seen here, the number of robberies with a firearm rose by 70 per cent between 1995 and 1997, increasing

from 726 incidents in 1995 to 1,234 incidents in 1997, before decreasing to 722 incidents in 2000. The number of robberies with a firearm rose again in 2001 but has since fallen every year over the last four years. In 2005, 488 robberies with a firearm were recorded, less than half the number recorded in 1997. There was no statistically significant trend over the 11 year period.

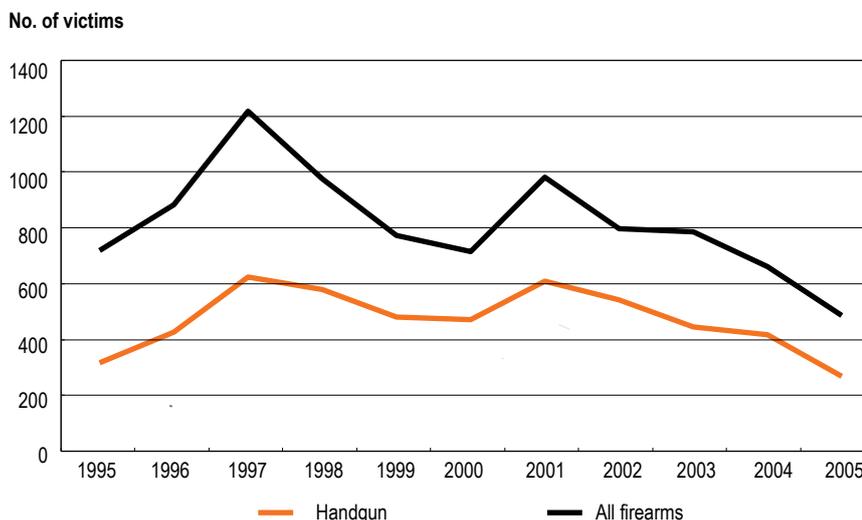
SHOOT WITH INTENT

Figure 3 shows the number of criminal incidents of 'shoot with intent' recorded by police between 1995 and 2005. The number of shooting incidents where a handgun was used is also shown in this figure.

While there was no statistically significant upward or downward trend in shooting incidents ($p = 0.39$) over the 11-year period examined, the trend in these offences was anything but uniform. During the first six years of the study period, the number of 'shoot with intent' incidents increased by 83 per cent, rising from 63 incidents in 1995 to 115 incidents in 2001. After a peak in 2001, shooting incidents fell by over 40 per cent, to around 65 incidents per year in 2004 and 2005.

Shooting incidents with a handgun showed a more dramatic rise between

Figure 2: Recorded criminal incidents of robbery with a firearm, and with a handgun, NSW, 1995-2005



1995 and 2001, increasing from nine incidents in 1995 to 53 incidents in 2001. After this peak in 2001, however, the number of shooting incidents involving a handgun fell back to around 20 incidents, whereupon it has remained relatively stable.

Figure 4 shows the rate of shooting incidents per 100,000 population in the Sydney Statistical Division and in the

remainder of NSW for the period 1995-2005. As seen here, across all years examined, the rate of shooting incidents was much higher in the Sydney area than elsewhere in the State. In 2005, for example, the rate in Sydney was twice the rate recorded in other NSW areas, with 1.2 shooting incidents recorded per 100,000 population compared with 0.6 recorded incidents per 100,000 population.

Figure 4 also shows that the shooting incident rate per 100,000 population has varied greatly over the 11-year study period in both Sydney and in the remainder of NSW. The highest recorded incident rate in Sydney was in 2001, while areas outside of Sydney recorded their highest rates in 2000.

Figure 5 shows the rate of shooting incidents per 100,000 population in selected Statistical Subdivisions (SSDs) within Sydney. These SSDs were chosen because they generally recorded higher rates of shooting incidents than other Sydney areas over the 11 years examined. Of particular interest were the Canterbury-Bankstown and Fairfield-Liverpool SSDs given that Fitzgerald, Briscoe and Weatherburn (2001) found a pronounced increase in handgun shootings in these locations over the period 1995-2000.

As seen from Figure 5, the rate of shootings across these selected Sydney areas has varied considerably over the last 11 years. The Inner Sydney SSD recorded the highest rate of shooting incidents in the mid to late 1990s, but since this time the rate of shooting incidents has fallen considerably (with the exception of a noticeable spike in 2001).

Fairfield-Liverpool SSD, on the other hand, recorded a relatively low rate of shooting incidents in the mid to late 1990s, but by 2000 the rate in this area had risen to over eight incidents per 100,000 population. Since 2000, the rate of shooting incidents in Fairfield-Liverpool has fallen, but still remains noticeably higher than other Sydney areas.

Between 1995 and 2000 there was also a large increase in shooting incidents in the Canterbury-Bankstown SSD. In 2001, the rate of shooting incidents in Canterbury-Bankstown decreased slightly, but rose again the following year. In 2003, however, the rate in this area fell considerably and has since remained at these lower levels.

Shooting incidents in Central Western Sydney varied markedly between 1995

Figure 3: Recorded criminal incidents of shoot with intent total, and with a handgun, NSW, 1995-2005

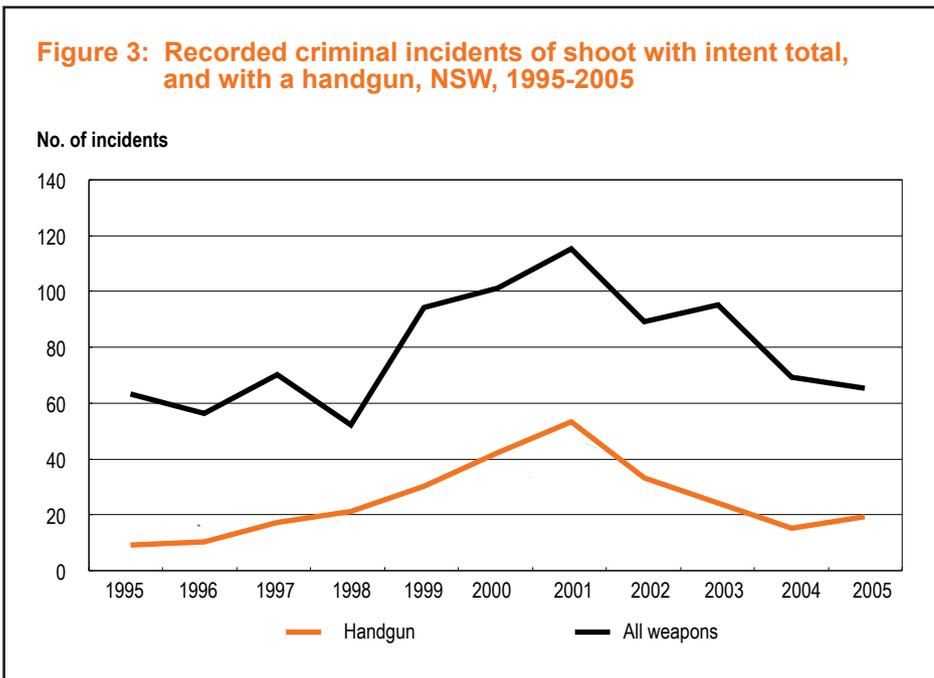
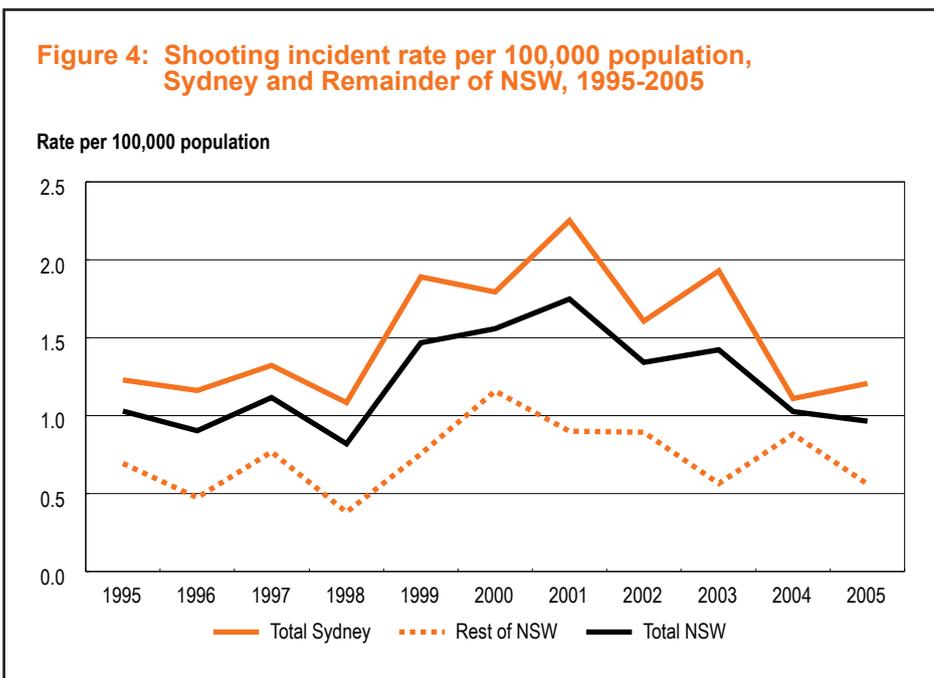


Figure 4: Shooting incident rate per 100,000 population, Sydney and Remainder of NSW, 1995-2005



and 2005 but have generally increased over this period. In 2003, this area recorded nine shooting incidents per 100,000 population, the highest rate recorded in any SSD in Sydney during the study period. By 2005, the rate of shooting incidents in Central Western Sydney was similar to the rates recorded in the Canterbury-Bankstown and Inner Sydney areas.

ALL CRIMINAL INCIDENTS INVOLVING A FIREARM

Figure 6 shows the total number of recorded criminal incidents involving a firearm and the number of incidents involving a handgun. The trends seen here are similar to those reported for robbery, with the number of incidents rising from 1995 to 1997, a slight fall in incidents between 1998 and 2000 and then another increase in 2001. Since

this time, however, there has been a gradual decrease each year in the number of recorded incidents involving a firearm.² The overall downward trend in this offence category was statistically significant ($p=0.03$).

While a similar trend is also apparent for criminal incidents involving a handgun, the decline in recorded incidents since 2001 is not as great. This means that the percentage of firearm offences involving a handgun was higher in 2005 (40%) than it was in the mid 1990s (30% in 1995). Statistical tests showed no significant upward or downward trend in handgun incidents over the 11-year period examined ($p=0.70$).

AGE AND FIREARM OFFENCES

Figure 7 shows the age breakdown of alleged offenders involved in firearm incidents. Only data for males are shown here given that they represent the vast majority of all persons who come into contact with police for firearm offences. For comparative purposes these data are shown for both 2000 and 2005.

As seen from this figure, the age-specific rate of offending has fallen for all age groups, with the exception of 10-14 year olds (though the rate of offending amongst this group was substantially lower than most other age groups). In 2000, there were over 90 alleged male offenders aged 15-19 per 100,000 population, which was almost twice the rate for any other age group. By 2005, the offending rate of 15 to 19 year olds had fallen sharply to just 45 alleged offenders per 100,000 population. While 15 to 19 years remains the most common age of persons identified by police in relation to firearm incidents, the age-specific rate of offending for this group is now very similar to the rate for males aged 20 to 29 years.

LOCATION OF FIREARM OFFENCES

Table 2 shows the location where robberies with a firearm and shoot with intent incidents occurred, as recorded

Figure 5: Shooting incident rate per 100,000 population, selected Sydney Statistical Subdivisions, 1995-2005

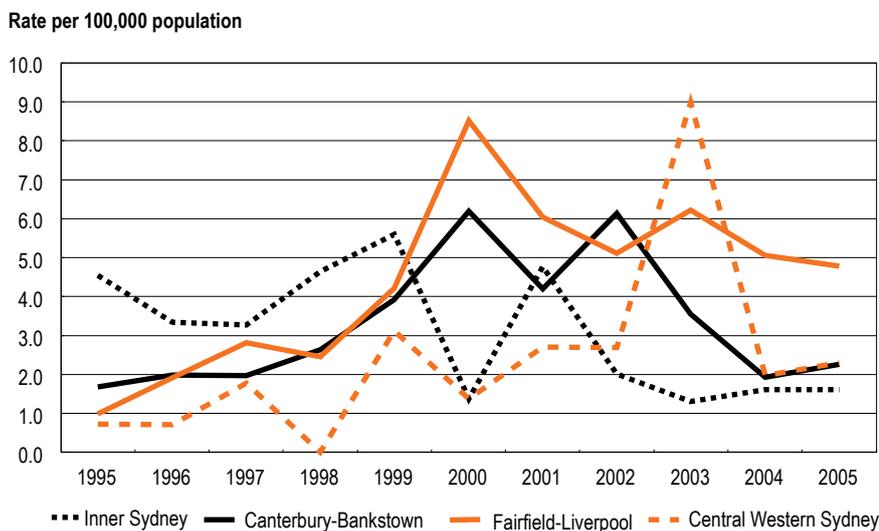


Figure 6: All recorded criminal incidents involving a firearm, and a handgun, 1995-2005

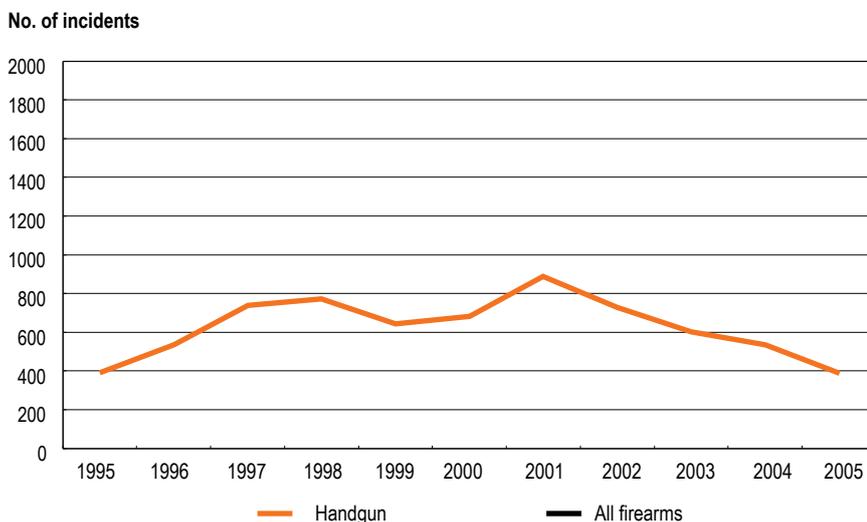
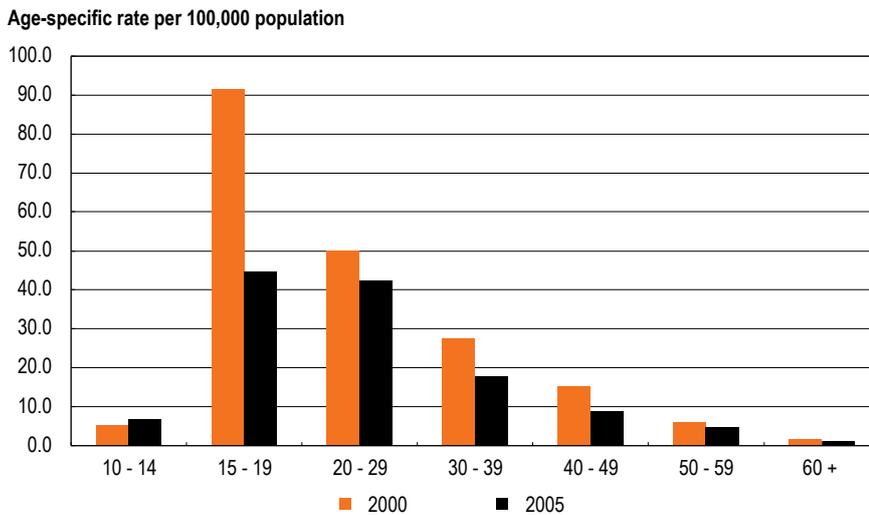


Figure 7: Age-specific rate of offending per 100,000 population of male alleged offenders in firearm incidents, NSW, 2000 and 2005



by the NSW Police in 2005. Murders involving a firearm are not reported here because of the small number of incidents recorded.

Robberies with a handgun or another type of firearm most commonly occurred on business/commercial premises, with licensed premises and outdoor/public place the next most common premise type for these offences. Robberies with a handgun are slightly more likely to occur in licensed premises and outdoor/public places, and less likely to occur on business premises, than robberies with other types of firearms.

Forty-two per cent of handgun shootings and half of all shootings with other types of firearms occur in outdoor/public places: a considerably higher proportion than armed robberies. Residential premises was the other location type where shooting incidents frequently occurred, with 26 per cent of handgun shootings and 44 per cent of shootings with other firearms occurring in this location.

Table 2: Recorded criminal incidents of robbery and shoot with intent by premises type, NSW, 2005

Premises type	Robbery incidents		Shoot with intent incidents	
	Firearms other than handguns N = 221 (%)	Handguns N = 267 (%)	Firearms other than handguns N = 46 (%)	Handguns N = 19 (%)
Adult Entertainment	0.5	0.4	0.0	0.0
Business/Commercial	52.5	39.0	2.2	0.0
Carpark	0.9	3.7	0.0	5.3
Education	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0
Health	0.0	0.0	2.2	0.0
Industrial	1.4	0.4	0.0	0.0
Licensed Premises	14.0	24.0	2.2	10.5
Marine Transport	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0
Outdoor/Public Place	18.1	22.5	50.0	42.1
Recreation	0.5	0.0	0.0	5.3
Religious	0.0	0.4	0.0	10.5
Residential	8.6	7.5	43.5	26.3
Transport	0.9	0.7	0.0	0.0
Utilities	1.4	0.7	0.0	0.0
Vehicle	0.5	0.7	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

SUMMARY

The purpose of this brief was to provide statistical evidence bearing on: (1) the extent to which firearms are used in the commission of offences and (2) the extent to which the incidence of firearm offences has varied over the last 11 years.

In NSW, in 2005, police recorded 933 criminal incidents involving a firearm and 388 of these were committed with a handgun. Most criminal incidents involving a firearm were classified as an assault or a robbery. However, when we consider firearm incidents as a proportion of all incidents recorded, firearms are rarely used. Instead, our analysis suggests that robberies and assaults are far more likely to involve a knife, with over three times as many robberies and over nine times as many assaults involving a knife. A higher proportion of murders and attempted murders are committed with a firearm, with 20 per cent and 46 per cent of these incident types involving firearms, respectively. However, homicide offences are rare.

Our analysis also shows that the number of recorded firearm offences has been declining in NSW in recent years. Over the 11-year period examined, the number of people killed with a firearm decreased by 45 per cent and the number of robberies with a firearm decreased by 33 per cent.

While recorded criminal incidents involving a handgun have generally followed the same trend as all firearm offences in NSW, handgun offences have not declined to the same extent. As such, the proportion of firearm incidents that are committed with a handgun is now higher than it was in the mid to late 1990s. For example, in 2005 approximately 60 per cent of armed robberies involved a handgun, compared with just 43 per cent in 1995. Having said this, the prevalence of handgun offences in NSW still remains low. Last year there were 267 robberies involving handguns in NSW. On a per capita basis this equates to an annual rate of 4.0 incidents per 100,000 population.

The trend in shooting offences between 1995 and 2005 differs from the trend observed for all criminal incidents involving a firearm and for firearm-related robberies. As reported by Fitzgerald et al. (2001), there was a significant rise in the number of shoot with intent incidents in NSW between 1995 and 2000. Shooting incidents rose again in 2001 to 115 recorded incidents but have since fallen substantially. By 2005 recorded shootings in NSW had decreased by 46 per cent and were at similar levels to those recorded in the mid 1990s.

Despite the recent decline in shoot with intent incidents, the rate of these offences is still much higher in Sydney than it is elsewhere in NSW and the recorded rate is particularly high in the Inner-Sydney, Canterbury-Bankstown, Fairfield-Liverpool and Central Western SSDs. The trend in shooting offences in each of these Sydney areas varied markedly over the 11 years examined, but Fairfield-Liverpool SSD has continued to record relatively high rates in recent

years. In fact in 2004 and 2005, Fairfield-Liverpool SSD recorded the highest rate of any Sydney area, with more than twice as many shooting incidents in this area compared with the Inner Sydney, Central Western Sydney and Canterbury-Bankstown SSDs.

Consistent with previous reports (Fitzgerald et al. 2001), the data presented in this paper suggest that offenders identified in relation to firearm offences tend to be young males and that involvement in firearm offences declines significantly with age. Our analysis also shows that since 2000, the age-specific rate of offending has fallen for nearly all age groups, with the drop in offending most pronounced for 15 to 19 year olds. Although offenders aged 15 to 19 are still more likely to be involved in firearm offences than any other age group, the rate per 100,000 population for these offenders is now only slightly higher than the recorded rate for offenders aged 20 to 29.

trends reported here would not be affected.

- Figure 6 shows the number of recorded incidents involving a firearm or handgun from 1995 to 2005, rather than the rate per 100,000 population. The population of NSW rose from 6,126,981 in 1995 to 6,731,295 in 2005, an increase of almost 10%. This means that the decreases noted here are an underestimate of the reduction in the incidence of firearms offences.

REFERENCES

Fitzgerald, J., Briscoe, S. and Weatherburn, D. 2001, *Firearms and Violent Crime in New South Wales*, Crime and Justice Bulletin no. 57, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, Sydney.

NOTES

- The robbery figures for 1995 to 2000 are slightly higher than those shown in an earlier bulletin by BOSCAR (Fitzgerald et al. 2001). This is because in 2004 the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research changed the composition of the robbery offence category to include 'demand money with menaces' incidents. This change resulted in an increase in the total number of recorded robbery incidents of approximately five per cent. Additional improvements in the methods used to identify weapon involvement in robbery incidents (including demand money with menaces) has also resulted in an increase in recorded robbery incidents involving a weapon. While the data shown in the current paper is higher than that reported by Fitzgerald et al. (2001), the changes to the classification of robbery offences were retrospectively applied to data for earlier years, meaning that the 11-year

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