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In reply please quote:

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MEDIA RELEASE

Firearms and violent crime in New South Wales

Homicides and robberies with firearms have declined over the last few years in New South Wales but non-fatal shooting offences have increased. These are two of the key findings to emerge from a new research study on firearm violence released today by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.

The Bureau report shows that in 1995 there were nearly 30 homicides involving firearms in New South Wales but last year only about half this number of firearm homicide offences occurred. Robberies involving firearms increased from 677 in 1995 to more than 1,100 in 1997 but fell back to 655 last year.

Non-fatal shooting offences remained relatively stable between 1995 and 1998 but increased from about 50 offences in 1998 to nearly 100 offences last year. The increase in shooting offences involving handguns has been particularly marked, with less than 10 of these offences in 1995 but more than 40 of them last year.

Despite the growth in shooting offences, their prevalence in Australia remains much lower than that in the United States. The US firearm homicide rate remains more than 13 times higher than that in Australia. Furthermore, the NSW robbery rate, which is the highest among Australian States and Territories, is only about one-sixth that of the United States.

Two areas (Canterbury-Bankstown and Fairfield-Liverpool statistical subdivisions) accounted for 55 per cent of all handgun shootings which occurred in New South Wales last year. They also showed the largest increase in handgun shootings. Between 1995 and 2000 handgun shootings in these areas increased from zero to more than 20.

Young males aged between 18 and 19 years of age are much more likely to be suspects in firearm offences than males of any other age group. Once they leave their teenage years the risk of involvement in firearm violence drops sharply. By the time they reach the age range 20 to 24, for example, males are less than half as likely to be implicated in a firearm offence.

Commenting on the findings the Director of the Bureau, Dr Don Weatherburn, said that they underlined the need for concerted action in restricting the flow of unregistered firearms into the community.

'Federal and State Governments have done a great deal to try and reduce the availability of firearms in the community. Unfortunately, unregistered firearms are now a highly sought after commodity among offenders. Some unscrupulous gun dealers have been prepared to exploit this state of affairs.'

'The NSW Police Service Firearms Trafficking Unit has been aggressively and successfully pursuing suspected owners and distributors of unregistered firearms. However some legal loopholes have become apparent which make it possible to obtain or create a firearm without having to register it.'

'The new firearm legislation presently under consideration by the NSW Parliament is designed to close these loopholes. For this reason it is an important further step in preventing firearm violence in New South Wales.'

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