



Statistical Report **2** Series 2 May 1975

Published by the Department of the Attorney General & of Justice NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics & Research T Vinson Director

Intentional Shootings

A joint project of the Bureau & the NSW
Police Department Ballistics Unit

Background

In a previous report (Series 2, No.1) we examined the incidence of firearm casualties in New South Wales and the characteristics of both the shooters and victims involved in gun accidents. We now turn to two other types of firearm casualty, namely suicide (or attempted suicide) and criminally inflicted death or injury.

Both have in common the fact that they are not 'accidental' at least in the sense intended in the previous report. However, our review of both suicides and criminal firearm casualties will indicate that they are often impulsive, 'spur of the moment' acts rather than considered, intentional shootings.

Inevitably, our analysis again focuses on the role played by the accessible lethal weapon in transforming an aggressive impulse into a fatality. In the Australian context this means examining the role played by the sporting rifle or shotgun rather than the revolver or pistol.

Part 1

Suicides/Attempted Suicides

A total of 97 gun suicides were reported in New South Wales during the year July 1973 - June 1974*. Nine out of ten (89.7 per cent) of the victims were men.

More than seven out of ten (72.2 per cent) of the shootings classified by the investigating police as suicides or attempted suicides resulted in death. While it could be argued that the remaining 27 casualties included a small number of 'attention seeking' cases, the majority represented serious threats to the lives of those involved.

*See the previous report for a description of the firearms casualty report system.

For example, 22 of the 27 cases included injuries to the head, chest or abdomen. Obviously, the wounds sustained in these attempted suicide cases were extreme. In one case, the bullet pierced the upper and lower jaw and tongue and then fragmented in the upper forehead. In another, it passed through the stomach and liver and came out through the back. Another young man placed the muzzle of a rifle against his chest, and the bullet passed near the heart before lodging in his shoulder.

For all practical purposes the whole of the 97 cases of reported firearm suicides or attempted suicides can be regarded as serious attempts to terminate life. The vast majority (94 per cent) of the self-shootings were directed at either the head, chest or abdomen:

Table 1 Most Serious Wound Location

	Percentage
Head	71.1
Abdomen	12.4
Chest	10.3
Other	6.2
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	100.0

For the sake of convenience we will refer to all the events encompassed by the above table as 'suicides'. 1

Age

The age pattern of suicide victims was somewhat different from that revealed by the earlier study of gun accident casualties. The latter group contained a high proportion of young people in their late teens. Gun suicide cases, on the other hand, were more evenly spread over all age groups, although young adults (20-24 years) and middle-aged (45-54 years) were over-represented. The general suicide rate (that is, for all forms of self-inflicted death) also peaks between 40 and 50 years of age but does not show the same substantial increase among young adults:

Alcohol

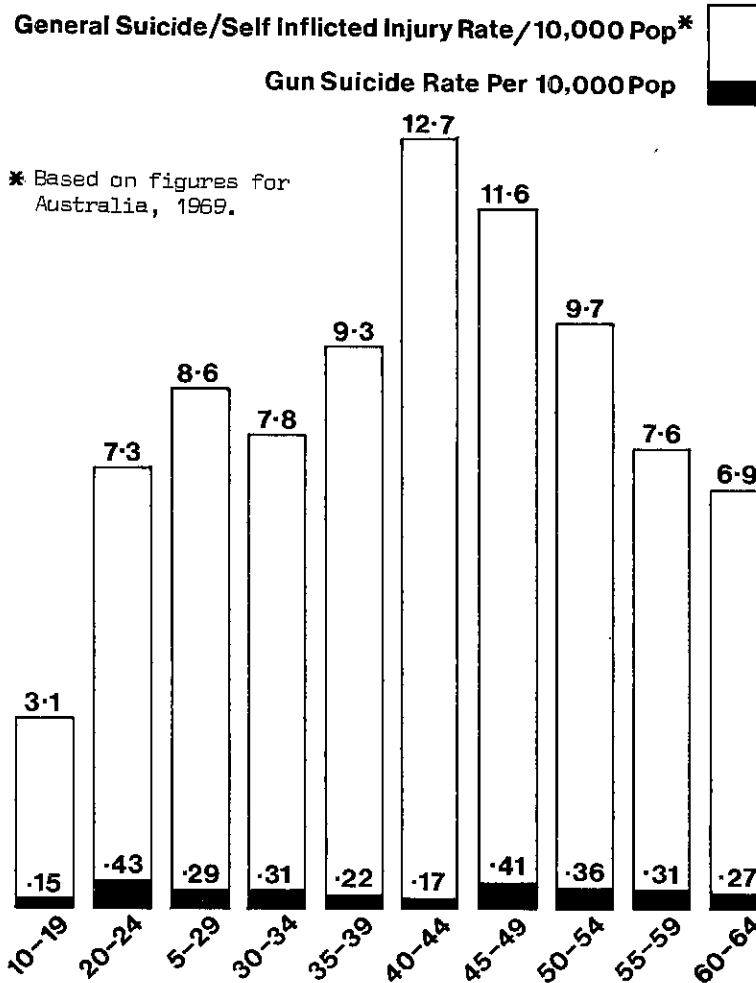
Regardless of their degree of dissatisfaction with life, most people would admit doubting that they possess the necessary 'courage' to commit suicide. To what extent, then, do those who actually attempt suicide with a firearm fortify their resolve with alcohol?

We have only a partial answer to this question. Information concerning whether the victim had been drinking was not available in one third of the suicide cases. Of the 67 cases in which the investigating police offered an opinion, 23 (34.3 per cent) of the victims were said to have been drinking prior to the shooting.

Gun suicides occurred more frequently at weekends than during the week. Saturday accounted for almost a quarter (23.7 per cent) of the cases whereas those occurring on wednesday, thursday and friday between them represented less than a third (30.8 per cent) of the total.

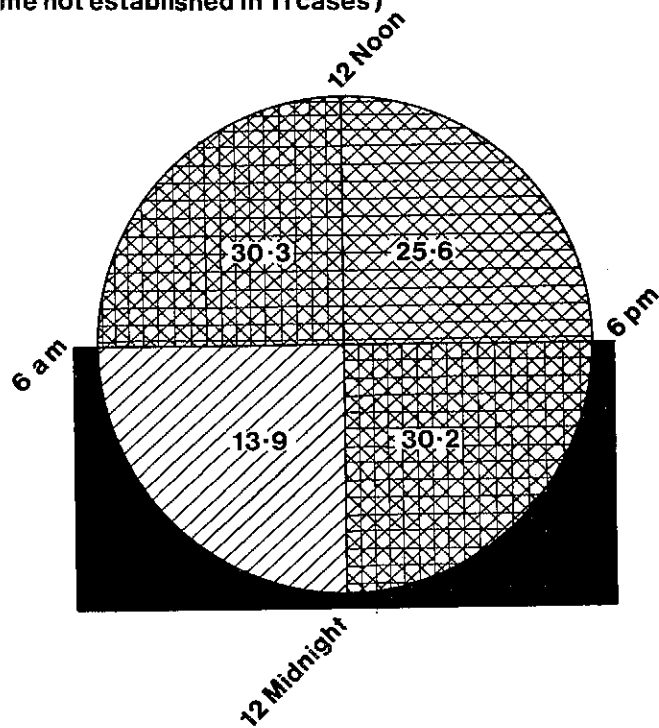
Table 2 Age of Gun Suicide Victims

(N=88 Age not stated in 9 Cases)



Although the time of suicide was not established in eleven cases, it is clear that comparatively few occurred between midnight and dawn. Otherwise the shootings were fairly evenly spread, with the exception of the two hour period 6.00 p.m. - 8.00 p.m. which accounted for one sixth of the total suicides. Those who had been drinking were especially likely to attempt suicide in the early hours of the evening. In fact, two-thirds of this group shot themselves between 6.00 p.m. and midnight.

Table 3
Times of occurrence of Gun Suicides as Percentages
(N=86; time not established in 11 cases)



Weapon

In the first report in this series it was shown that rifles and sporting weapons account for more than nine out of ten gun accidents in New South Wales. A very similar pattern was found to exist among suicide cases. Only three pistols and two revolvers were included in the weapons used in the 97 instances of suicide or attempted suicide*:

Table 4 Type of Weapon used

	Number	Percentage
RIFLE	80	82.5
Single shot	30	
Repeater	28	
Self loading	22	
SHOT GUN	11	11.3
Single shot	4	
Double barrel	7	
REVOLVER/PISTOL	5	5.2
NOT STATED	1	1.0
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	97	100.0

Three out of four (76.3 per cent) of the weapons used in suicide cases were .22 calibre. The lethality of this type of weapon was discussed fully in the previous report, where it was noted that it accounted for two-thirds of the gun accidents in New South Wales. One gun suicide in twelve involved a 12 gauge shotgun:

*All but one of these handguns were registered.

Table 5 Calibre of Suicide Weapons

	Number	Percentage
.22	74	76.3
12 gauge	8	8.2
.303	4	4.1
.25	3	3.1
.222	2	2.1
.410	2	2.1
Other	4	4.1
	<hr/> 97	<hr/> 100.0

Geographic Location

Until we have the results of an Australia wide gun census* it is not possible to test, in any precise way, the relationship between the distribution of firearms and their use as suicide weapons. However the preponderance of rifles over handguns in Australia, and the far greater number of firearm accidents among people living in rural areas, support the commonsense view that there are many more gun owners living outside the capital cities.

This assumption is important because of the role which guns can play in translating even a momentary aggressive impulse towards others or oneself into a fatality. In other words the ready availability of a lethal weapon may often be more important than the seriousness of intent of the gun user in determining whether he or someone else will die.

If our assumption about the distribution of firearms is correct, then Table 6 (below) illustrates dramatically the role played by the gun in making it easier for those in rural areas to translate thoughts of suicide into a reality:

*A census is being conducted by Professors G. Hawkins and R. Harding.

Table 6 Area of Residence of Gun Suicide Victims

	Population	Number gun suicides	Rate per 100,000
Sydney Statistical Division	2,807,828	21	0.1
Newcastle	146,009	5	3.4
Wollongong	161,143	4	2.5
Rest of State	1,486,200	65	4.4
Not specified		2	

That there was a 44 times greater rate of gun suicide in rural areas compared with the Sydney Statistical District is not a reflection of the total suicide rate of the two areas. When suicides of all types are compared, the Sydney rate is actually 1.4 times that of the 'rest of State', 1.8 times the rate for Newcastle and marginally higher than the rate for Wollongong:

Total Suicides (1973)

	Rate per 100,000
Sydney	14.6
Newcastle	8.2
Wollongong	13.0
Rest of State	10.2

Part 2 Criminal Gun Casualties

Motive

There is a need to investigate the motives of those who attempt suicide. It is not unusual to find a new weapon and all but one of a new packet of 50 bullets at the scene of a self-shooting. Hence the expression 'The 49 club' used by ballistics experts to describe many gun suicides.

Unfortunately, the existing report form did not require investigating police to nominate the shooter's motive for attempting suicide. However, in eight cases it was noted that the victims had been receiving treatment for mental disorders and in three cases that they were known previously to have attempted suicide.

There were 76 reported firearm casualties resulting from criminal activity, during the year July 1973 - June 1974. In 39 cases (51.3 per cent) the victim died. More than six out of ten of the shootings were classified as murder, attempted murder or manslaughter*:

Table 7 Types of Criminal Firearm Casualties

	Number	Percentage
Murder	34	44.7
Attempted murder	9	11.8
Manslaughter	5	6.7
Malicious wounding	25	32.9
Shoot, intent prevent arrest	1	1.3
Shoot, intent cause greivous bodily harm	2	2.6
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	76	100.0

Men were much more likely than women to be either the shooter or the victim in a criminal firearm casualty. However, when women did become involved they were three and a half times more likely to be the victim rather than the attacker in a gun assault:

Sex of Victim/Attacker (N=76)

	Victim %	Attacker %
Men	72.4	92.0
Women	27.6	8.0

*These offences may have been re-defined at a later stage of the legal process.

Weapon

The earlier reviews of gun accidents and suicides showed that very few of those casualties involved pistols or revolvers. Nevertheless, it might be argued that both accidents and suicides involve 'ordinary' members of the community who are not intent on harming others, and therefore have no reason to acquire a concealable weapon. Perhaps those who assault others with guns, or use them as a means of intimidation for personal gain, are more likely to use a pistol or revolver.

For the moment we will put to one side robberies and similar offences where no one is wounded. However, in those cases where injury or death result from the criminal use of guns we find very few instances in which a handgun is used. In the year under review only three criminal firearm casualties involved a pistol or revolver. On the other hand, more than seven out of ten cases involved a rifle, and one in five a shotgun:

Table 8 Type of Weapon Used

		Number	Percentage
RIFLE		55	72.4
	Single shot	10	
	Repeater	34	
	Self loading	6	
	Air gun	4	
	Not established	1	
SHOT GUN		17	22.4
	Single shot	6	
	Double barrel	8	
	Not specified	3	
REVOLVER/PISTOL		3	3.9
OTHER		1	1.3
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		76	100.0

We have previously noted that the .22 calibre weapon was involved in 65 per cent of firearm accidents and 76 per cent of suicides. Its role in criminal firearm casualties was somewhat less dramatic. Nevertheless, .22 calibre weapons were involved in more than half the gun assaults and deaths. The 12 gauge shotgun accounted for slightly less than one in six of these cases:

Table 9 Calibre of Weapon (Criminal Firearm Casualties)

	Number	Percentage
.22	39	51.4
12 gauge	12	15.8
.303	5	6.6
.222	4	5.3
.410	2	2.6
.243	2	2.6
.38	2	2.6
Other	8	10.5
Not established	2	2.6
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	76	100.0

Alcohol

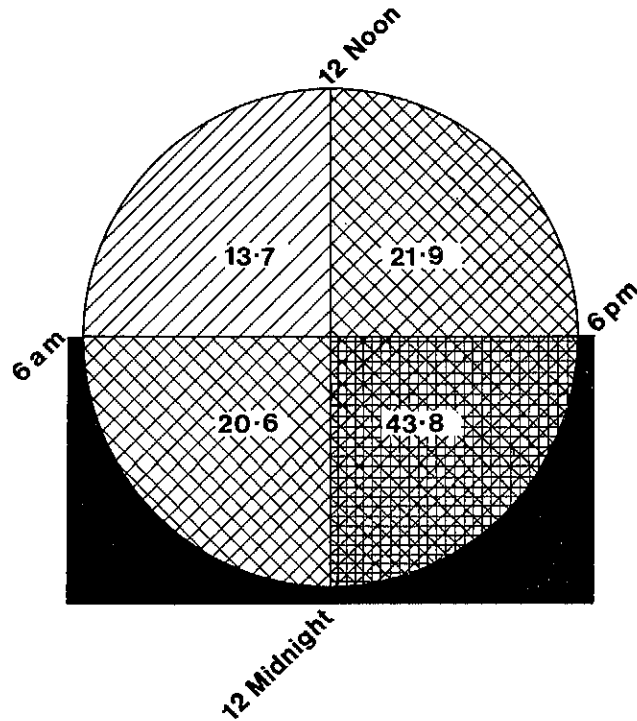
The question concerning the consumption of alcohol was completed in only two-thirds of the criminal firearm casualty reports. The required data was less often recorded by the investigating police where the victim had died.

In more than two out of five (44.0 per cent) of the 48 cases for which complete information was available the shooter had been drinking prior to the offence. In almost as many cases (40.0 per cent) the victim had been drinking.

The six hour period between 6.00 p.m. and midnight witnessed twice as many criminal firearm casualties as any equivalent segment of the day.

Table 10 Time Casualty Occurred

(N=73 Time not specified in 3 cases)



Both victims and assailants in criminal cases were generally older than those involved in firearm accidents. For example, twice as many of the shooters in accident cases (74.4 per cent) as in criminal cases (38.4 per cent) were under twenty five years of age. A similar pattern existed with respect to the two groups of victims.

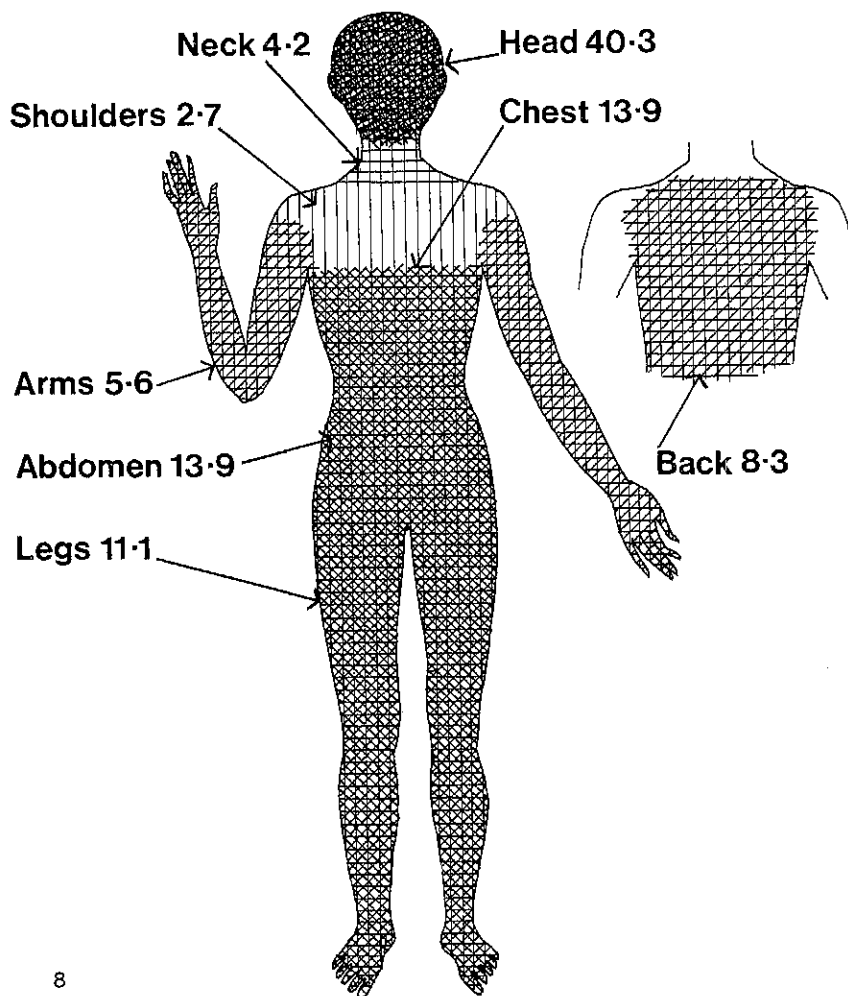
Still, despite these differences between the two types of casualties, we should not lose sight of the fact that two out of every three gun assaults and homicides were committed by people under thirty years of age:

Table 11 Ages of Shooters/Victims

	Shooter (N=65; age not specified in 11 cases)	Victims (N=67; age not specified in 9 cases)
	%	%
10 - 19 years	21.5	22.4
20 - 24 years	16.9	16.4
25 - 29 years	26.2	17.9
30 - 34 years	10.8	10.4
35 - 39 years	9.2	10.4
40 - 44 years	1.5	16.4
45 - 49 years	9.3	4.6
50 years+	4.6	1.5
	<hr/>	<hr/>
	100.0	100.0

Table 12 Wound Location

(N=71 Location not stated in 4 cases)



The pattern of wound location was different from that revealed by the study of gun accidents. More than three times as many firearm accident victims (54.4 per cent) as those injured or killed in gun assaults (16.3 per cent) were wounded in the arms or legs. However, the victims in criminal cases were two and a half times as likely to be shot in the head.

Geographic Location

There was a higher rate of gun assaults among people living outside the Sydney metropolitan area. However, the differences were less pronounced than with gun suicides. Newcastle and Wollongong had the highest rate (approximately three shootings per 100,000 population). Next was 'rest of State' (i.e. rural areas), with a rate of 1.88 per 100,000 population, and the Sydney Statistical Division (1.38 per 100,000).

The position is reversed dramatically when we broaden the focus of our investigation and take account of all crimes involving the use of firearms, regardless of whether anyone was injured. To do this we must go beyond the casualty reports and make use of general statistics of crime reported to the police during 1974. Then we can see whether the greater prevalence of gun assaults and homicides in country areas is matched by the more frequent use of guns to commit other types of crime.

Unfortunately, our general statistical data on crimes involving firearms does not enable us to identify the usual place of residence of offenders. Nevertheless, if we look at armed robberies during 1974, the picture is fairly clear: the rate is thirty times higher in Sydney than in the 'rest of State'.

Table 13 Robbery involving use of Firearms 1974

	Population	Number robberies	Rate per 100,000
Sydney Statistical Division	2,807,828	223	7.94
Newcastle	146,143	1	0.68
Wollongong	161,143	6	3.72
Rest of State	1,486,200	9	0.26

The above data does not tell us why homicides and gun assaults should occur as frequently as they do in country areas, despite the fact that the same regions have been shown to be relatively free of other forms of serious crime.* Other research conducted by the Bureau has provided at least a partial answer to this question.®

It has been found that disputes in which a person has access to a gun are much more likely to result in a fatality than those where other types of weapons are available. Such homicides are generally unrelated to other forms of crime. In 80 per cent of cases they involve lovers, spouses, other family members or neighbours. Two out of three homicides result from altercations, especially domestic conflict - clashes over money, sex, liquor, children and romantic entanglements.

Obviously the city has no monopoly on these human motives. It would seem, however, that the conflicts to which they give rise are resolved differently depending on the availability of lethal weapons. If in the heat of the moment one of the protagonists can place his hands on a gun then his opponent is at least three times more likely to be killed than if he resorted to using the most likely substitute weapon, a knife.

Comment

We have now reviewed three types of firearm casualties (accidents, suicides and assaults) and found that they all occur more frequently in rural areas where, presumably, there are more guns. However, neither the general tendency to suicide or the inclination to commit crime are as strong in country areas as they are in the cities of New South Wales.

The gun plays a uniquely effective role in translating aggressive impulses into self-destructive or homicidal acts. It is at least possible that stricter controls on the purchase and distribution of firearms might prevent momentary impulses from causing fatalities.

To explore this possibility we need detailed answers to a number of questions including when and how those responsible for gun assaults and suicides acquire their weapons. With the help of the Police Ballistics Unit, the Bureau will attempt to answer these and related questions in a final report on gun casualties, to be published later this year.

* Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, Statistical Report No. 6, 'Crime in Our Cities' November 1972.

® Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, Statistical Report No. 9 'Gun and Knife Attacks'.