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Is Far-Right Violence Actually Increasing in Australia? Tracking Far-Right Terrorism and Violence in Australia

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Is Far-Right Violence Actually Increasing in Australia?

Tracking Far-Right Terrorism and Violence in Australia Between 1990–2020

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In recent times, governments throughout the Western world have warned of an increase in far-right violence. A range of government and academic sources has also made spectacular claims regarding a rise in far-right violence in Australia. However, for a variety of reasons, the actual prevalence of far-right violence occurring in Australia remains largely unknown. To address this gap in knowledge, the following documents acts of far-right violence and terrorism in Australia between 1990 and 2020. This study demonstrates that no clear increase has actually occurred. A total of 181 incidents are identified across almost all geographic locations, with concentrations of violence noted in Melbourne and North Queensland. A clear spike in violent incidents was identified between 2005 and 2010. However, a complete reduction in fatal violence has occurred since that time, and there has also been a notable reduction in violent events across most years since that peak. Notably, only a vanishingly small number of incidents were perpetrated by individuals associated with organised far-right groups. Rather, the vast majority of attacks are committed by lone actors or small unorganised groups, often spontaneously. To date, this more chronic form of far-right violence has been almost entirely overlooked by policymakers. Moving forward, it will be interesting to see if Australia's existing counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism infrastructure, built primarily to address a Jihadist threat that is highly networked, geographically concentrated, and transnationally linked, can be adapted to combat a far-right that is largely unorganised and geographically decentralised.

Keywords: Far-right, Australia, counter-terrorism, targeting, lone actor

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Introduction

In February 2020, the Director-General of Australia’s leading domestic intelligence agency noted that in Australia, “the extreme right-wing threat is real and it is growing.”¹ This assessment followed the killing of 51 people by an Australian right-wing extremist in Christchurch in 2019. However, it is not immediately clear where this threat emerged from, and by what level it had grown. Indeed, for a range of reasons, the prevalence of right-wing violence in Australia across the decades preceding this statement is largely unknown. Although this dearth of knowledge is not unique to Australia, it clearly makes effective responses difficult to implement. To better understand right-wing violence in Australia, and whether or not the problem is actually increasing, the following will explore incidents of far-right terrorism and violence that occurred between 1990 and the end of 2020.

This paper will begin by presenting a brief history of the far right in Australia, before analysing a range of statements made regarding the prevalence of right-wing violence over time. It will then explore the intersecting reasons, both political and methodological, why the scale of such violence has remained opaque. This study then documents incidents of far-right terrorism and violence in Australia that had fatal, or near-fatal outcomes. It charts who the targets of this violence were, where the violence occurred, and how such events have evolved over time. It then analyses the perpetrators, and the weapons used in each incident. The final section will discuss how these findings might be used to guide more targeted counter-terrorism policies and countering violent extremism practices moving forward.

The Far Right

In recent times, governments throughout the Western world have warned of a rise in far-right violence.² While ‘far right’ remains a scholarly contested concept, definitions have become “more parsimonious and more similar” across recent decades.³ Broadly, the ‘far right’ is an umbrella concept, generally used to refer to both the ‘radical’ and ‘extreme’ variants of right-wing politics.⁴ The “radical right refers to milieus, organisations and individuals who pursue right-wing beliefs* via democratic processes.”⁵ By contrast, right-wing extremism opposes democratic principles and practices, and advances a highly selective view of the national citizen that excludes religious, racial, and sexual minorities.⁶ Such actors also view violence as a potentially legitimate means to achieve their political and ideological goals. However, researchers have noted “increasingly porous borders and growing links” between the radical and extreme right in recent times, somewhat blurring this definitional distinction.⁷ Scholars including Perry and Scrivens,⁸ Fangen and Nilsen,⁹ and Mudde¹⁰ have also highlighted the country-specific nature of the far right, suggesting that understanding this phenomenon also requires understanding the specific sociopolitical environment of a particular location. The following therefore aims to understand violence perpetrated by ‘far-right’ actors within the Australian context.

A wide range of academic studies has provided detailed analysis of violent extremist activity in Australia. However, much of this research has focused on the Jihadist phenomenon.¹¹

* ‘Right-wing beliefs’ here refers to the view of social inequality as inevitable, natural or even desirable.

Historically there has been a “lack of scholarly interest” in far-right activism and violence in the Australian context,¹² although this has begun to shift with recent works produced by Campion¹³ and Smith.¹⁴ While some studies analysing the activities of right-wing milieus have also recently emerged,¹⁵ these typically do not incorporate incidents of physical violence. The few studies that do rely almost exclusively on idiosyncratic case studies or “non-probability samples of victimisation experiences.”¹⁶ Recently, an attempt was made to quantify past incidents of right-wing violence for the Victorian Governments ‘Inquiry into Extremism,’¹⁷ and this work will be explored later. Overall though, research into right-wing activity in Australia, and particularly far-right violence, remains “conceptually and empirically underdeveloped.”¹⁸ To address this shortcoming, the following will systematically document and analyse far-right violence that occurred in Australia between 1990 and the end of 2020.

The Far Right in Australia Historically

In order to fully contextualise the far-right violence being perpetrated today, it is important to recognise that radical right-wing beliefs are historically ingrained into Australian society. In 1901, Australia’s first Prime Minister stated “I do not think that the doctrine of the equality of man was really ever intended to include racial equality,” and the first action of the Commonwealth of Australia was to introduce an Immigration Restriction Act. This ‘White Australia Policy’ remained in place until the 1970s.¹⁹ Radical right policies were also domestically focused, with Indigenous Australians remaining segregated from many activities within society until the 1960s and 70s.²⁰

Organised far-right groups first appeared in Australia after World War I, beginning with the ex-soldier’s fascist movement (known as the White Army).²¹ Later came the Australia First Movement, whose members were interned during World War II²² after becoming involved in “conspiratorial plans” to kill prominent Australians and potentiality side with the Japanese.²³ Post-World War II, most attempts to form far-right groups failed to attract “even a moderate following.”²⁴ The victory of the Allies, together with the continuation of various ethno-exclusivist government policies across the following decades, combined to make the extreme right largely “irrelevant.”²⁵ However, a shift away from Nazism (and towards Communism) as the primary existential threat to Australia in the post-war years, coupled with efforts to remove the racial exclusivity previously entrenched in Australian law, seeded the rise of several violent extreme-right groups throughout the 1980s.

In 1982, Jim Saleam and Frank Salter established National Action (NA). In 1985, following a failed leadership coup within NA, Jack van Tongeren founded the Australian Nationalists Movement (ANM). These two groups adopted a more explicitly neo-Nazi identity than previous actors, and their primary target group shifted towards the ‘immigrant.’²⁶ Both groups became increasingly violent throughout the 1980s, and by 1988 the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) noted that the “politically motivated activity” of these groups had “reached a peak.”²⁷

Inspired by *The Turner Diaries*,²⁸ ANM attempted to manufacture a crisis in race relations by conducting a series of attacks against Asian targets.²⁹ By August 1989, ANM had caused over

one million dollars (AUD) in damage³⁰ and had attacked left-wing opponents of the group. There was also talk of murdering senior police officers and government officials and nail-bombing a Vietnamese pool hall. In response, Operation Jackhammer arrested eight senior ANM figures in Perth and Sydney.³¹ When sentencing van Tongeren to 18 years in prison for 53 offences including assault occasioning grievous bodily harm, arson, and causing an explosion, the Judge noted that it is “no overstatement or exaggeration to term your campaign of those months a terrorist campaign and ... you waged a guerrilla war against the public.”³² Separately, two NA members were convicted of repeatedly shooting at the home of the Australian representative to the African National Congress,³³ and Saleam was jailed for supplying the shotgun.³⁴

Following the jailing of NA and ANM’s leadership, both organisations imploded in a spectacular storm of internal violence. ANM supporter David Locke had his throat slit by two group members who believed him to be a police informant,³⁵ while ANM associate Colin Irvine stabbed and killed Daniel Mark English.³⁶ Two weeks later, Irvine was shot and killed by the Western Australian tactical response group.³⁷ Within NA, Wayne ‘Bover’ Smith was shot eight times by NA member Perry John Whitehouse, who suspected him of speaking to police,³⁸ while NA member Erich Kuhn was killed by his older brother in a drug-related dispute.³⁹ Finally, Dane Sweetman (the individual who inspired the movie *Romper Stomper*) and Martin Bayston murdered fellow skinhead David ‘Pommy’ Noble during a drunken argument at a party celebrating Hitler’s birthday.⁴⁰ The removal of so many key actors left the remnants of both groups — and by extension the Australian extreme right — largely impotent. This was acknowledged by ASIO, who in 1991 noted that Australia’s “racist right ... had suffered serious set-backs.”⁴¹

The emergence of the extreme right as the primary “discernible domestic threat of politically motivated violence,”⁴² moved the government to commission a ‘National Inquiry into Racist Violence’ (NIRV) in December 1988. At the launch of this inquiry, a “widespread community perception that racist attacks ... were on the increase” throughout Australia was noted.⁴³ A significant segment of the inquiry was therefore dedicated to documenting “acts of violence or intimidation based on racism directed at persons, organisations or property.”⁴⁴ However, since the conclusion of this inquiry in 1991, the level of serious violence and terrorism perpetrated by the extreme right in Australia is almost entirely unknown. There are 2 reasons for this.

A Gap in Knowledge

The first reason for this gap in knowledge is that there exists no national system for monitoring extreme-right violence in Australia.

As far back as the 1980s, the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) highlighted that “no statistics were being kept on racially-motivated [*sic*] crimes.”⁴⁵ The problems caused by this lack of systematic data collection were subsequently underlined by the NIRV, which formally recommended that “such statistics be collected, collated and analysed nationally by the appropriate Federal agency.”⁴⁶ As the national crime statistics agency, this recommendation was presumably directed towards the AIC. However, the Institute appears to have made no effort to collect such data, and since that time has produced only one publicly available report even mentioning racist violence. As recently as 2017, a member of the Australian Federal Police

(AFP) noted that it was highly unlikely anything would change in this area “until somebody dies ... until the day a white supremacist walks into a mosque.”⁴⁷ Unfortunately, even following the murder of 51 individuals during Friday prayers by a 28-year-old Australian, there remains no observable movement towards building a national system to monitor and analyse right-wing terrorism and violence.

Across most jurisdictions, violence characterised by the motivations of the offender is not usually considered “legally different to an act of violence motivated by profit or revenge.”⁴⁸ The clearest method for distinguishing right-wing violence would be to prosecute offenders using terrorism legislation. However, such legislation was not introduced in Australia until the mid-2000s. Moreover, until the prosecution of Phillip Galea in mid-2016 for “acts in preparation for a terrorist act,”⁴⁹ no right-wing actor had been charged using Australian terrorism legislation. Hence the current legal framework does not provide a clear ability to consistently distinguish these events from a multitude of other criminal activities.

Limited hate crime provisions have been introduced within a small number of Australian states.⁵⁰ For instance, in 1999 the NSW police force began recording ‘bias crime,’[†] and a dedicated Bias Crime Unit was formed in 2015.⁵¹ However, in 2019 this unit contained only one member⁵² responsible for monitoring all bias crime across a population of more than 8 million people. It seems fair to assume that this unit might be somewhat under-resourced. A dedicated bias crime policy was also implemented by Victoria Police in 2011. However, a recent study found that there remained a failure of “officers to identify bias crime, despite dedicated training.”⁵³ While such efforts are undoubtedly a step in the right direction, this work is not uniform, and is limited in both its scope and geographic coverage.

More recently, the Victorian Parliament initiated a large ‘Inquiry into Extremism,’ specifically focused on understanding right-wing activity. Buried within a long list of recommendations (specifically recommendation 34) was that Victoria “develop a strategy to collect, monitor and regularly report government data on vilification conduct and prejudice-motivated crime.”⁵⁴ While on the surface this recommendation appears promising, unfortunately no guidance was provided regarding the scope of data to be collected. Even if implemented, the likelihood of a national dataset emerging anytime soon remains highly questionable.

The second reason for this gap in knowledge is a dearth of empirically based research into right-wing terrorism and serious violence.

While large datasets monitoring far-right violence globally do exist, they do not provide the level of granular detail required to draw nuanced conclusions regarding domestic trends.⁵⁵ For instance, the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) is probably the most frequently used dataset in quantitative terrorism research, and serves as a basis for global policymaking.⁵⁶ However, the GTD suffers significant shortcomings when it comes to tracking far-right terrorism. One analysis found that incidents are “registered haphazardly ... often lack source references, and substantial information about perpetrators and context is often missing – or even misleading.”⁵⁷ More significantly, the data presented are frequently misinterpreted. This occurred most egregiously

† While not a specific offence, a ‘Bias Crime’ can be used as an aggravating factor in sentencing in NSW.

within a report produced by the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), which claimed to have identified a 320 percent rise in far-right terrorism between 2012 and 2018.⁵⁸ Following the release of that report, Interpol warned of “a dramatic rise in right-wing violence” globally,⁵⁹ and the United Nations (UN) voiced deep concern about a “growing and increasingly transnational threat of extreme right-wing terrorism.”⁶⁰ Both based their threat assessments on data produced by GTI.⁶¹ However, the GTI report did not control for changes in data collection by the GTD that had been implemented over time.[‡] So despite other authoritative research demonstrating that fatal far-right attacks remained ‘relatively stable’ across this period (including within both Western Europe⁶² and the USA⁶³), this claim of a significant increase in far-right violence continues to be repeated throughout a range of research globally.

An attempt was made by a group of Australian academics to quantify past incidents of right-wing terrorism and violence for the Victorian ‘Inquiry into Extremism.’⁶⁴ This study identified 91 incidents between 1990 and 2020, and these cases are later considered by this study.[§] However, this submission was the only academic work identified that has actually attempted to quantify incidents of far-right violence. In the absence of any meaningful government-run monitoring effort and/or longitudinal academic scholarship, a number of community groups have attempted to track various forms of right-wing violence. Such efforts have largely focused on documenting incidents perpetrated against a particular ethnic group, or on monitoring a specific geographic location. For example, the Executive Council of Australian Jewry has produced an annual report on Antisemitism for more than a decade, the Asian Australian Alliance documented incidents of racism perpetrated against Asian Australians following the COVID-19 pandemic, and a biannual report documenting incidents of Islamophobia has been produced since 2014. While these reports are helpful for understanding fractions of the problem, such efforts are often organised around limited budgets, and are only able to document limited periods of time and/or small geographic areas.

More problematically, these studies apply extremely vague definitions of incidents and amorphous inclusion criteria, resulting in reports that inconsistently document an extremely wide variety of phenomena (well beyond just serious violence). The National Inquiry into Racist Violence acknowledged this issue, noting that although “a number of attempts were made by organisations to quantify the incidence, this was seldom done in any systematic or methodical manner.”⁶⁵ Moreover, while such efforts are helpful in providing recognition for victims, and generating a perception of action following general incidents of racism (particularly in the face of community outrage), issues of measurement validity can lead to the over-inclusion of cases, which in turn can exaggerate the extent of the problem.⁶⁶ The large disconnect between what is being ‘documented’ and more general legal standards can also unintentionally create unrealistic expectations with regard to potential responses. So, while these efforts are well intentioned, such over-inclusive and unsystematic studies are not particularly helpful for analysing or planning proportionate responses to right-wing violence. A systematic and permanent method to monitor right-wing violence in Australia is clearly required.

‡ The GTD explicitly cautions against comparing incidents that occurred pre 2012 with those post because of the implementation of automated searches

§ 18 of these incidents are ultimately included in the sample below. 70 cases were excluded. Three incidents were unable to be identified.

Looking at immediately comparable countries internationally, New Zealand also does not maintain a national dataset tracking this phenomenon. Official data are collected in the United States, where the Federal Bureau of Investigation assembles national hate crime statistics annually. However, the results have been described as “terribly uneven,” “incomplete and skewed” and largely “meaningless.”⁶⁷ The UK and Canadian governments do collect national hate crime statistics, but do not distinguish between incidents committed between minority groups and those committed by far-right actors.

Looking beyond government efforts, one submission to the Victorian Inquiry specifically highlighted the Norwegian example as “best practice.”⁶⁸ Following a significant far-right terrorist attack in Oslo in 2011, the Norwegian government funded a Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX). The centre has established and maintains the Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence (RTV) dataset, which thoroughly and reliably documents incidents of far-right violence across Western Europe post-1990.⁶⁹ An equivalent dataset would be helpful to guide Australia’s counter-terrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts.

A State of Confusion

In the absence of any systematic effort to quantify incidents of far-right violence in Australia, a range of actors has made spectacular claims regarding the prevalence of this phenomenon. Some dismiss such violence as a fringe issue. Others depict right-wing violence as escalating alarmingly in both intensity and frequency. Indeed, comments regarding an ‘increase’ in far-right violence are made regularly, and often without reliable data or historical context.

As noted, the National Inquiry into Racist Violence was instigated due to a “widespread community perception that racist attacks, both verbal and physical, were on the increase,”⁷⁰ and by 1991, the inquiry had found that far-right groups had become “more violent in recent years.”⁷¹ The following year, the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) noted that “violent threats and assaults ... had rocketed since the Gulf crisis began,”⁷² while throughout the early 1990s Australia was also “experiencing a dramatic increase in levels of anti-homosexual violence.”⁷³ In 1995 ASIO warned of an “upsurge in the activities of ... neo-Nazis, and right-wing militia groups,”⁷⁴ and a year later stated that “radical conservatism is on the rise in Australia, and that neo-Nazi and extreme national militias had publicly indicated their willingness to resort to violence.”⁷⁵ By 1997, an academic study was proclaiming that “all available evidence points to an upsurge in the incidence of hate crime ... in Australia.”⁷⁶ A Government report appeared to confirm this “upsurge” two years later.⁷⁷

By 2000, Australia was being warned that “attacks on Jews and their institutions in Australia had reached record levels”⁷⁸ and an academic study published in 2002 concluded that the 9/11 attacks had prompted “a dramatic upsurge” in Islamophobic violence.⁷⁹ In 2004, community groups repeated claims of an “alarming increase in attacks on Arab and Muslim Australians ... from offensive remarks about race or religion to physical violence.”⁸⁰ Then in a statement bereft of historical context, in 2005 ASIO declared “white supremacists as a newer and lesser-known threat than well-monitored Islamic radicals.”⁸¹ That same year, “tough new police powers aimed at halting Sydney’s racial violence” were passed at an “emergency session” of Parliament.⁸² By

2009, the Tasmanian Law Reform Institute was making a series of recommendations to combat a perceived “increase in the number of allegedly racially motivated attacks in Australia.”⁸³

Moving forward to 2012, another academic study concluded that “all available evidence” indicated an escalation in hate crime.⁸⁴ In 2014 community groups were warning that there was a need to “respond against the increase in racist violence,”⁸⁵ and in 2016 ASIO again warned of the “growing threat that far-right groups may pose for public safety, especially by promoting communal violence.”⁸⁶ Victoria then reported a “50 per cent increase in racist attacks” in 2018.⁸⁷ Based on the above statements (which are illustrative and far from exhaustive), one might reasonably conclude that incidents of far-right violence increased consistently between 1990 and 2020. Unfortunately, in the absence of reliable longitudinal data, it is impossible to know how accurate such declarations have been.

Rather than focusing on violent incidents, recent commentary has shifted towards highlighting the ‘threat’ posed by far-right actors. In 2019 ASIO stated that “the threat from the extreme right-wing in Australia has increased,”⁸⁸ and in 2020 that the “extreme right-wing threat is real and it is growing.”⁸⁹ ASIO also noted that the far right now occupied between 30 percent and 40 percent of the CT caseload, up from around 10 percent previously.⁹⁰ This comment was widely interpreted as being due to a rise in far-right activity, rather than a decline in the influence of the Islamic State. The government went on to warn that “the possibility of a mass casualty attack being far right is now higher than it was 5 years ago.”⁹¹ So has the threat presented by the far right actually escalated? Or have government agencies simply paid more attention to right-wing actors following the Christchurch massacre in March 2019? To provide an evidence base by which to judge these claims, the following will identify and document incidents of right-wing violence and terrorism that have occurred in Australia between 1990 and the end of 2020.

Methodology

Establishing a precise operational definition of what constitutes serious right-wing violence is difficult. More generally, the ideological core of the extreme right consists of exclusionary nationalism, which holds that “the nation-state should be inhabited by natives only, and that non-natives are considered a fundamental threat to the survival of the nation.”⁹² This nativist view produces an ideological common ground for the far right and provides a list of shared enemies.⁹³ These groups, including racial, religious, and sexual minorities, as well as political actors who promote social inclusion, are then seen by those on the extreme right as legitimate targets for violence. When identifying incidents of far-right violence, a primary focus will therefore be on documenting incidents with clear statements and/or actions demonstrating nativist elements in their targeting. Events where a perpetrator self-identifies as right-wing, racist, etc., are given particular emphasis.

Two primary criteria were used to determine the inclusion of incidents: motive and severity. As a general rule, the dataset contains only events containing evidence to support a hypothesis of right-wing motivation. Here victims were deliberately targeted based on an element of their identity (race, religion, and/or sexuality) by a member (or members) of the nativist ‘white’ majority. Thus, the following will incorporate both acts motivated by a coherent far-right

ideology and incidents committed due to racist beliefs, as target selection can be considered a political message in and of itself. Incidents also do not require premeditation. As such, this study includes both acts of violence traditionally considered terrorism (which is most often deliberately planned and involves claims of responsibility) and more spontaneous attacks committed against perceived enemies or people regarded as unwanted by the far right.⁹⁴ Incidents where motivation remains unclear have not been included, nor have incidents caused by disputes within (or between) right-wing groups.⁹⁵

To be included, incidents must also have been severe enough to inflict significant physical injury on the victim(s), or have been perpetrated in a way that could have been physically disabling or even deadly. More specifically, the attack had a fatal, or near fatal outcome, or the perpetrator(s) proactively used potentially lethal weapons, and/or the attack caused significant injuries requiring hospitalisation or medical treatment.⁹⁶ Incidents of harassment or low-level physical violence have been excluded, as well as vandalism and other events of material damage (such as firebombs targeting empty buildings). While other datasets include these lower-severity incidents, such events are excluded here for two reasons. The first reason is that the threshold for committing severe physical violence is significantly higher than for making threats or hurtful remarks. As such, physical attacks should be treated as “analytically distinct phenomenon.”⁹⁷ The second reason relates to issues of representivity; i.e. “the extent to which existing datasets that include far-right violence correctly mirror the actual universe of far right violence,” and measurement validity.⁹⁸ As hate crimes, including harassment and lower-level violence, are significantly underreported and difficult to verify, and this study aims to be as consistent and all-encompassing as possible in its documentation of incidents, the threshold for inclusion has been set high and defined narrowly.

Along with incidents meeting the above criteria, three additional ‘preparatory’ activities have also been included. The first involves discoveries of bomb-making materials or significant weapons repositories belonging to far-right actors. A judgment of ‘significant’ is clearly subjective, but such repositories have been determined as ‘significant’ (or not) within the context of Australia’s limited availability of weapons more generally. The second preparatory activity included involves terrorist plots that were disrupted or failed. Although such plots make up a significant share of terrorist activity, many previous studies completely overlook foiled or failed attacks,⁹⁹ resulting in skewed representations of overall terrorist activity.¹⁰⁰ Foiled and failed plots are included in order to capture the totality of planned and perpetrated activity (not just the number of attacks that happened to avoid police detection). The final group involves cases of far-right actors being detained in prison beyond their original sentences (after being jailed for right-wing-motivated offences that did not reach a level of severity to warrant inclusion), as their release was considered too high of a risk to the community.¹⁰¹ These cases will be discussed in more detail during the analysis.

All incidents that occurred in Australia and met the aforementioned criteria were organised and catalogued into a Microsoft Excel database. In general, databases remain an underutilised resource in terrorism studies,¹⁰² and such repositories have the potential to generate valuable insights by aggregating data and tracking trends across time.¹⁰³ When information was entered into the database, all individuals involved (both victims and perpetrators) were systematically

deidentified and each incident assigned a unique identifier code. Cases included occurred between 01 January 1990 and 31 December 2020, a time period selected for two reasons. Firstly, 1990 was the final full year that the National Inquiry into Racist Violence was able to collect national data. Thus, this study commences where previous known work on this topic ceased. Secondly, this is the same time-period that the aforementioned RTV dataset has covered with regard to fatal attacks in Western Europe.¹⁰⁴ Moving forward, this will facilitate more reliable comparisons of right-wing terrorism and violence across geographical locations. Information about relevant incidents was also organised and coded across the same 25 unique variables used by the RTV dataset.

Data Collection

Information contained within the database was collected and triangulated via several interlinked stages of data collection. The process commenced with the use of a customised Boolean search string to query the Factiva news database. Initial searches were conducted by year, with more specific phrases and names used to elicit further information once potential incidents were identified. Approximately two-thirds of total cases were identified from this process. To identify cases that appeared in news sources beyond those covered by Factiva, the same search process was repeated using both ProQuest (an alternative news database to Factiva) and Trove (an online news collection hosted by the National Library of Australia). To cover the landscape of Australian news outlets which may have reported on violent incidents and create a more “complementary analysis” of press sources,¹⁰⁵ the digitised archives of left-wing publications including Green Left Weekly and the Star Observer were also searched.

The second stage of the data collection process involved the detailed reading of authoritative sources beyond traditional media.[¶] This included the small number of previous academic studies of far-right activity in Australia and reports produced by a range of State and Federal Government agencies. These studies pieced together how current understandings of domestic far-right activity have emerged.

The third stage involved exploring the data generated by a range of interest groups. This began with aggregating monitoring exercises undertaken by a range of community organisations and identifying potential incidents missed by the media. This was followed by a review of current and historical** blogs and social media accounts run by anti-fascist actors including (but not limited to) ‘Slackbastard,’ ‘Fight dem Back,’ and the ‘White Rose Society.’ On the flip side, publications produced by a range of far-right organisations were reviewed, including historical newsletters and even a PhD written by the founder of National Action Australia (a document that raises some complicated ethical questions). While such data allowed a deeper understanding of events from a community perspective, incidents identified by these actors were not included unless they were able to be verified via additional information sources.

¶ Thank you to Tim Wilson and the St. Andrews CSTPV team for facilitating access to the Global History of Terrorism Archive.

**Accessed via Internet archive ‘Wayback Machine.’ <https://archive.org/web/>

The final stage involved searching for the court or coronial inquest documents associated with each individual event (with various unique data points for each incident used to search the Australasian Legal Information Institute database). For 19 percent of the sample, more authoritative and detailed information was able to be drawn from the sentencing comments of judges, detailed histories of perpetrators and even telephone intercepts and listening device transcripts presented in court. This additional information allowed for a more detailed recording of these incidents, and more nuanced assessments of the motivations of perpetrators. This review also resulted in the exclusion of a small number of incidents that were reported as far-right violence in the immediate aftermath of the attack, but were ultimately found to have been committed for other reasons. Overall, the triangulation of multiple data sources helped to reduce the biases and deficiencies inherent in each individual source, revealed different evidence (of varying quality), and helped to increase the credibility of the following analysis.¹⁰⁶

Limitations

Several limitations to this study must be noted. As this dataset was built using open sources of information, it is likely some incidents have been missed. Specific details within cases may also be missing, even where court documents, normally considered the ‘gold standard’ for information,¹⁰⁷ have been identified. This is the unfortunate result of studying any illicit network, and it is unrealistic to expect that any dataset could cover the details of all serious right-wing incidents occurring throughout a three-decade period across one of the geographically largest countries on Earth. The ability to identify violent incidents is also not even across time. The digitisation of many news archives only traces back to the late 1990s, making earlier searches less systematic. While some major newspapers have searchable archives reaching back to 1990, these sources primarily focus on major geographical locations. Therefore, the coverage of incidents in more regional areas throughout the 1990s will likely be less comprehensive. For this reason, significant caution should be used when comparing results pre-1997 to more recent data drawn from a wider variety of sources.

Media and community reports are also of a more uneven quality than information elicited from primary sources. Community actors can selectively exaggerate specific aspects of what happened, and information can differ significantly from the final, corroborated version of events found in court documents. Media reports can also be heavily biased towards fatal and/or spectacular attacks.¹⁰⁸ So along with missing data, there may also be mistakes in the database.¹⁰⁹ Finally, several of the more recent cases remain before the Australian judicial system, and cases will require revision as additional details become available. As such, this work should have absolutely no bearing on the guilt or innocence of any individuals.

An Additional Note Regarding Anti-Queer Violence

It is also worth briefly noting the slightly different inclusion criteria operationalised for documenting violence targeting the Queer community.^{††} Unlike incidents where target

^{††} ‘Queer’ is here being used as an umbrella term to capture a range of gender and sexuality identities including (but not limited to) lesbian, gay, transgender, and bisexual.

selection is premised on a negative view of ethnic minorities, attacks committed by actors adhering to homophobic beliefs are not necessarily far-right *per se*. Incidents included in this sample demonstrate a clear link to right-wing beliefs and a degree of premeditated targeting. Conversely, incidents categorised as spontaneous have largely been excluded, as such events were overwhelmingly committed by individuals seemingly motivated by issues other than right-wing extremism. Such incidents fall into two broad categories.

The first involves the victim initiating an interaction, and the perpetrator(s) reacting violently to a perceived homosexual advance. The second category involves spontaneous violence committed in public areas, often late at night, and frequently involving alcohol. Here there has been no known prior interaction between the victim(s) and perpetrator(s), and very limited information about the perpetrator is known (beyond the fact that they targeted the victim — at least in part — based on the latter's identity). While these incidents clearly contain homophobic elements, it is unable to be determined if such attacks were motivated by right-wing beliefs specifically.

A number of attacks against the Australian Queer community were also excluded as they were perpetrated by individuals from a range of other minority groups. Thus, the following dataset documents only a fraction of total attacks against the Queer community in Australia. Any attempt to more fully understand violence motivated by homophobic beliefs should therefore be conducted through a wider lens than just right-wing terrorism and violence.

Results

An initial sample of 289 incidents was identified during this data collection process and coded into the database. Upon initial review, 44 were immediately excluded. In these cases, not enough information was available to sufficiently determine motive. Four incidents of internal violence among far-right groups were also excluded. Of the remaining 241 incidents, 117 were determined as warranting inclusion. The remaining 124 incidents were then reviewed across a series of meetings together with the RTV dataset research team. These group discussions explored a range of viewpoints related to the motive and severity of each incident. A number of coding rules were established, and these meetings facilitated an increased level of intercoder reliability between this study and the RTV dataset.^{‡‡} Ultimately, from 289 incidents, 108 events were excluded, leaving a final sample of 181 unique cases. The following will explore these 181 events to determine whether incidents of right-wing violence and terrorism have actually increased in Australia over time.

Incidents

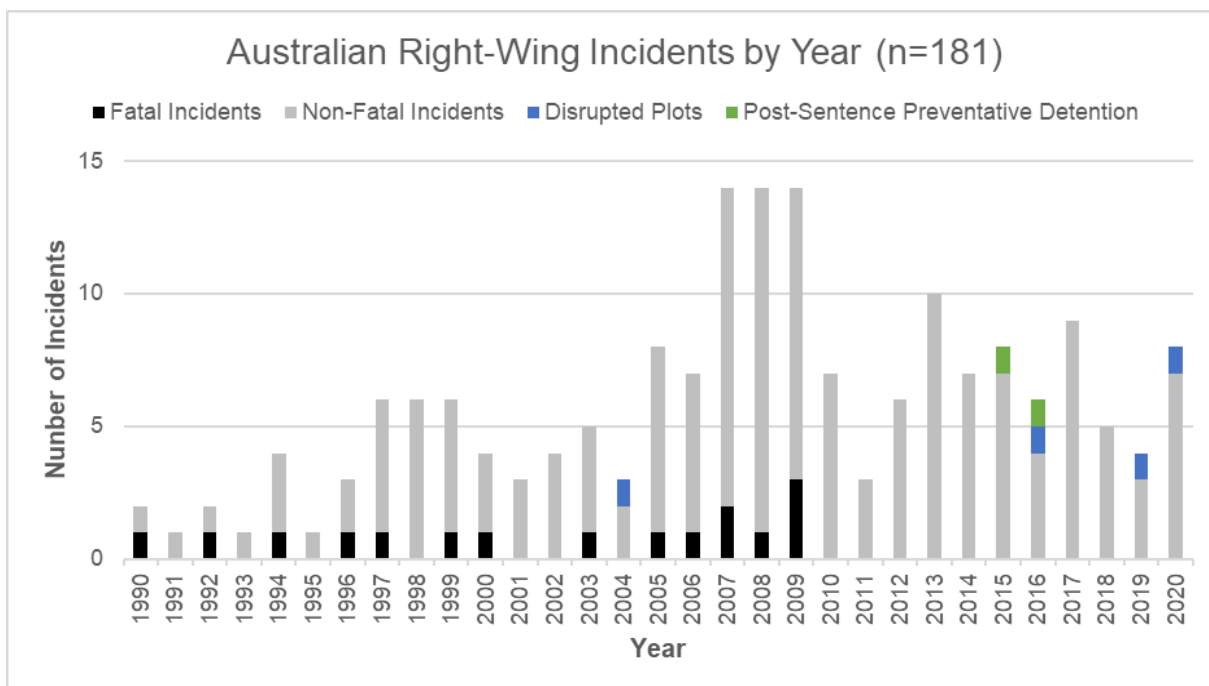
The first thing to note regarding the 181 incidents identified is that they are not evenly distributed across the period studied. As indicated by Figure 1 (which visualises the yearly distribution of incidents), a clear spike in violent incidents occurred between January 2005 and the end of 2009.^{§§} This five-year period accounts for almost one-third (57) of total incidents.

‡‡ Thank you to Jacob Aasland Ravndal, Madeleine Thorstensen, Charlotte Tandberg, Anders Ravik Jupskås, and Simone Sessolo for their advice and guidance in the development of this dataset.

§§ This period included the Cronulla Riots. The riots began on 11 December 2005 at North Cronulla Beach, with

How this happened will be explored throughout the following analysis.

Figure 1 – Australian Right-Wing Incidents by Year



The second notable finding is that, despite repeated statements from a range of government and academic sources, incidents of right-wing violence have not increased in recent years. There has been a comparative increase in the total number of incidents across the most recent decade, with 66 events taking place in the ten years following the 2005–2009 peak, compared to just 41 incidents across the decade preceding it. However, since 2013 the total number of incidents has largely trended downwards. Hence, recent statements indicating an increase in right-wing violence in Australia do not appear grounded in evidence or context.

As noted, previous reports of an increase in violent incidents need to be differentiated from statements warning of an increasing ‘threat’ of violence. To better understand such statements, it is necessary to examine the severity of the violence that is occurring. To do so, these 181 incidents have been divided across four broad categories. These include fatal incidents, non-fatal incidents, disrupted terrorist plots, and post-sentence preventative detention orders.

A total of sixteen fatal events occurred between 1990 and the end of 2020. These incidents resulted in sixteen separate fatalities, with no mass casualty attacks conducted by right-wing perpetrators. Importantly, 50 percent of these fatal incidents took place during the 5-year peak, while the remaining 50 percent occurred prior to 2005. With zero individuals killed by an act of right-wing violence for more than a decade in Australia, any perceived increase in the overall ‘threat’ cannot be based on violent events (either in total or severity). Notably, while a

a predominantly Caucasian Australian crowd becoming violent towards targets of Middle Eastern appearance. Ultimately 104 people were charged with 285 criminal offences (51 in relation to the events of 11 December, and 53 to reprisal attacks that occurred over the following days). For more detail see: New South Wales Police, Cronulla Riots Review of the Police Response: Chronology. Volume 2 of 4 (Sydney: Strike Force Neil, date unknown)

general decline in violence (and particularly lethal violence) may come as a surprise to many in Australia, this very much mirrors findings from Western Europe, where a clear decrease in lethal violence has also been occurring across recent times.¹¹⁰

Regarding the potential for such violence to occur, four foiled or failed terrorist plots were also identified within the dataset. Each was ranked according to ‘attack plausibility,’¹¹¹ assessing a combination of relevant factors including capability and target selection.¹¹² The most advanced of these plots occurred in 2020 on the New South Wales South Coast, with 3 individuals arrested as part of a ‘semi-mature’ plot. In 2016 and 2004, plots categorised as ‘intermediate’ were intercepted by police in Victoria and Western Australia. A ‘semi-vague’ plot was also intercepted in Adelaide in 2019. These recent plots are often used as evidence of an increasing threat, particularly as prior to 2016 no right-wing individual had faced ‘terrorism’ charges. However, the limited maturity of two of these recent plots, coupled with the identification of a small number of other potentially violent cases in earlier years (see paragraph below), indicates an increasing willingness of police to intervene earlier in the investigative process (particularly following the 2019 Christchurch attack), rather than an increased threat of right-wing mass-casualty violence per se.

An additional five cases were coded as ‘preparation for armed struggle.’ Here, bomb-making materials and/or major arms repositories belonging to right-wing actors were discovered, but without any known discussions of potential targeting. These cases included a large cache of explosives found in an underground bunker in the lead-up to the 2000 Sydney Olympics, two men charged with manufacturing explosives in the aftermath of the 2005 Cronulla riots, a former soldier arrested in 2011 for storing explosives and weapons at his mother’s house (and testing explosives in his backyard), a large cache of weapons discovered in 2015 by a Taskforce Maxima (investigating a drug distribution in far-North Queensland), and an Australian member of The Base^{¶¶} charged with possession of bomb-making materials. Although not considered plots, these cases certainly had the potential to evolve into incidents of mass casualty violence. Whether some of these events would have attracted a more serious terrorism charge if identified within today’s political climate is an open question. However, the regular occurrence of such events over a period of time suggests that the threat of mass casualty violence by extreme-right actors is not new.

The third category involves individuals issued with post-sentence preventative detention orders. Here two Australians were jailed in New South Wales for right-wing-motivated offences that did not reach a level of severity to warrant inclusion. These men were subsequently assessed as posing an ‘unacceptable risk to the community’ (at least in part because of their beliefs), and were subjected to further detention and/or supervision beyond the terms of their original sentence. The emergence of these cases in recent years provides further evidence of an increasing political ‘awareness’ of far-right actors and lower risk tolerance for potential violence.

The final and largest category involves non-fatal incidents, which account for 85 percent (154)

¶¶ As of 2022, The Base was one of three extreme-right groups prescribed as ‘Terrorist organisations’ by the Australian Government, along with National Socialist Order and *Sonnenkrieg* Division.

of events within the dataset. For the reasons noted above, the period between 1990 and the end of 1996 also likely under-records such lower-severity violence. Clearly, non-fatal community-level attacks are the primary way in which right-wing violence manifests in Australia. It is also immediately clear that police, policymakers, and the media in Australia almost entirely overlook these more chronically occurring acts of violence when assessing the threat posed by the far right.

Target Group

The primary identity group targeted in each of these 181 cases is presented below in Table 1. While a range of other individuals, including good Samaritans and bystanders, may also have been injured in these events, Table 1 lists only the primary target of the attack. Though these categories may be broad and imprecise, they reflect what the perpetrator understood their target to be (rather than a description of the victim specifically). Due to variations in the type of target selected over time, Table 1 is divided into three discrete time periods.

Table 1 – Targets of Violence

Primary Identity Targeted	1990–1999	2000–2009	2010–2020	Total
Indigenous Australian	13	21	6	40 (22%)
Asian	6	12	14	32 (18%)
Indian subcontinent	-	9	19	28 (15%)
Muslim / Middle Eastern	2	12	9	23 (13%)
Black African	1	10	6	17 (9%)
Queer	8	2	6	16 (9%)
Pacific Islander	-	3	1	4 (2%)
Jewish	-	2	1	3 (2%)
Bystander	-	2	-	2 (1%)
Left-Wing	1	-	1	2 (1%)
Deserter	1	-	-	1 (1%)
Unknown	-	3	10	13 (7%)
Total	32	76	73	181

Since the colonisation of Australia, there has been extensive violence perpetrated against Indigenous communities. Between 1788 and 1930, 421 unique massacre sites of Indigenous Australians have been identified, with notable clusters occurring between 1872 and 1896.¹¹³ Serious violence was also perpetrated by far-right actors against this group in the years immediately preceding this analysis.^{***} Such events included:

- an incident at a ‘whites only’ roadhouse in Willowra, where Indigenous people could only purchase alcohol from a hole cut in the back door. The publican refused service to two Indigenous men who entered requesting food, and an argument followed. One Indigenous man was shot dead, and the other wounded.¹¹⁴

^{***} More than 500 Indigenous Australians have also died in custody since 1991.

- five Indigenous people drinking together in Alice Springs that were given alcohol by a group of 'white' men. The alcohol was laced with a poisonous substance, and all five were killed.¹¹⁵
- a group of 'Anglo' men that drove through a remote Indigenous campsite, harassing residents and attacking them with baseball bats. The group later returned with guns, shooting a young boy in the knee and a pregnant woman in the stomach.¹¹⁶

Table 1 demonstrates that Indigenous people have also been the most frequent target of right-wing violence in Australia post 1990. Along with accounting for almost one in every four attacks committed across the past three decades, 50 percent of fatal incidents were also perpetrated against Indigenous targets.

On paper, there does appear to be a reduction in the number of attacks targeting Indigenous Australians across the past decade. However, these figures should be treated with caution. While there are almost certainly unreported incidents targeting all minority groups (at least to some degree), this problem is likely particularly pronounced among Indigenous communities. Not only does this group have a troubled relationship with police and the criminal justice system (with high levels of distrust making individuals hesitant to report), but much of the violence targeting Indigenous Australians also occurs in extremely remote locations (with limited media coverage and policing presence). This means that the percentage of total incidents recorded against Indigenous Australians is likely underestimated.

The other group potentially underrepresented is the Queer community. While incidents involving such victims appear largely concentrated in metropolitan locations, many events likely remain unreported due to a historical distrust of (and mistreatment by) police.¹¹⁷ Moreover, when violence against the Indigenous or Queer communities is reported, the subsequent reaction from media and government is simply not comparable to the volume of coverage (identified by this study) following incidents targeting other ethnic or religious communities. This may be due (at least in part) to the fact that the Indigenous and Queer communities have comparably less well-organised and well-resourced advocacy groups than the Jewish, Muslim, or Indian Australian communities do. So, while the Indigenous and Queer communities are the victims of more than 60 percent of fatal events and account for 30 percent of total incidents across the sample, violence targeting these groups likely constitutes an even greater percentage of overall incidents.

Forty-three percent of attacks targeted minority ethnic groups. These attacks cluster around specific locations and time periods and appear to directly correlate with waves of migration (and an associated increase in the visibility of these communities). This phenomenon is particularly notable for the Indian community. No violence was identified as targeting this group prior to 2005. However, they are the most targeted victim group since that time, and the only community to suffer a significant increase in attacks across the past decade. There is also a clearly identifiable escalation in the targeting of the Muslim community following 11 September, 2001. While a reported increase in violent incidents following the first Gulf War appears to be over-emphasised by previous studies,¹¹⁸ an increase is certainly evident post-September 2001.

Finally, it is worth noting the consistency in the total number of incidents occurring across the past two decades (with 76 incidents in the 10 years between 2000–2009, and 73 in the eleven years between 2010 and the end of 2020). While there has been an evolution in the targets of far-right violence, the number of attacks occurring appears remarkably stable. What has occurred is a complete reduction in fatal attacks.

Perpetrator Type

Table 2 presents the type of attacker identified as committing each incident. Of the 174 incidents where the perpetrators were able to be identified, more than 90 percent were carried out by lone actors (single perpetrators who commit attacks alone), informal groups (three or more individuals with a general right-wing commitment, but whose association primarily relies on social bonds) or unorganised perpetrators (two or more perpetrators with unknown or no association to any specific right-wing group, cell, or gang).

Table 2 – Perpetrator Type

Attacker	Incidents	Percentage
Directed / Organised / Affiliated	10	5%
Social / Informal / Unorganised	99	55%
Lone actor	65	36%
Unknown	7	4%
Total	181	100%

Contrarily, only 5 percent of perpetrators had any known affiliation to an organised far-right group (whether acting on instruction from the group, or on their own initiative).^{†††} Moreover, most of the incidents affiliated with organised groups occurred during the early 1990s. To be clear, organised far-right groups were active throughout the period studied, and their actions pose a larger existential threat to Australian liberal democracy by gradually widening the Overton window and undermining government institutions. They also frequently harass and intimidate opposition and minority groups, both online and offline.¹¹⁹ However, while such organisations may be increasingly visible, only a vanishingly small number of violent incidents have been perpetrated by individuals associated with organised far-right groups in Australia across the past twenty years. When extreme right groups do perpetrate serious (including lethal) acts of violence, it is much more likely to be directed towards other members of the far right rather than the wider community.

For twenty of these 181 incidents, the level of planning involved could not be determined. More than half (58 percent) were coded as spontaneous. Such acts were mostly triggered by unexpected encounters and were predominantly perpetrated by lone actors or small unorganised groups. None resulted in fatalities. The remaining incidents involved a perpetrator (or perpetrators) pursuing a predefined person or target group in a premeditated attack.

^{†††} Among actors affiliated with organised groups, there is no evidence of any connection to transnational far-right networks. While information may of course be missing, and there is certainly evidence of ideas being shared trans-nationally, those perpetrating violence appear geographically isolated and almost entirely disconnected from wider transnational networks.

Every single fatal attack (sixteen) was determined to be premeditated, as were (by definition) all four disrupted terrorism plots. Thus the twenty cases with the most serious outcome (or potentially most serious) were all premeditated. Given these differences in overall outcomes, future research may benefit from analysing premeditated and spontaneous attacks as distinctly different forms of far-right violence.

Notably, only five of the 57 premeditated incidents were carried out by a lone actor (excluding foiled attacks), and none were affiliated with any form of organised group. Where lone actors associated with the far right have carried out premeditated attacks in other broadly comparable Western countries, these events have had a devastating impact (see for example the 2019 Christchurch or 2017 Quebec attacks). Thus, better understanding this subgroup of five perpetrators might be helpful in reducing the risk of a mass casualty incident of far-right violence in Australia.

Weapons

The primary weapon (or method of attack) used in each incident is documented in Table 3.

Table 3 – Primary Weapon Used

Attack Type	Number of Total Incidents	Percentage Total	Number of Fatal Incidents
Severe beating	90	50%	5
Knife / sharp object	26	15%	3
Blunt instrument	23	12%	5
Firearms	13	7%	2
Glass	10	6%	-
Explosives	8	5%	-
Car	4	2%	1
Petrol bomb	3	2%	-
Sexual assault	2	1%	-
Arson	2	1%	-
Other	1	1%	-

Differences in the level of planning behind each incident are also reflected in the type of weapon used. As the majority of right-wing violence appears to be spontaneous, it is no surprise that 50 percent of incidents involved no weapons. A number of the blunt-instrument attacks also appear to involve improvised weapons spontaneously discovered at the scene of the event, as do all 10 incidents classified as ‘glassing.’ Such cases broadly involve a perpetrator attempting to push an empty beer or whisky glass into a victim’s head or face (as opposed to using glass as a stabbing weapon or a bottle as a blunt object). This particular type of violence appears unique to Australia. While the use of a glass bottle as a weapon was occasionally documented within the RTV dataset, this was largely in the context of group or mob using bottles as projectiles. Overall, the vast majority of right-wing attacks in Australia appear to come from lone actors or small unorganised groups, perpetrating spontaneous acts of violence using readily available (or no) weaponry. As noted by the 2022 RTV report, such “lower-scale, but still severe, right-

wing violence is probably causing more fear and intimidation ... than mass-casualty terrorist attacks are.”¹²⁰

Only 12 percent of incidents involved the use (or planned use) of explosives or firearms, which is likely related to the extreme difficulty of obtaining such weapons. Australia is widely recognised as having some of the most stringent firearm regulations in the world,¹²¹ and many of the components used to construct explosives are also heavily monitored. The scarcity of such dangerous weaponry is likely also responsible (at least in part) for the low levels of lethality among Australian incidents. That less than 10 percent of incidents produced a fatal outcome, and that there were zero mass casualty attacks across the period studied, is surely related to the low numbers of firearms used in attacks, and that any firearms used were of a low calibre and/or capacity. Such firearm controls may also have contributed to the Christchurch gunman’s decision to conduct his attack in New Zealand, and not his country of birth, Australia.¹²² In his manifesto, the attacker showed significant awareness of firearm restrictions, and noted his attack would impact future gun ownership in New Zealand.¹²³ Less than a month after the incident, New Zealand’s parliament banned military-style, semi-automatic weapons.¹²⁴ Thus the banning of firearms, particularly high calibre rifles such as the AR-15-style guns used by the Christchurch shooter or the semi-automatic rifle used by the Utøya attacker, should be considered an important step in helping prevent mass casualty attacks.

Location

In terms of where this violence has occurred, Figure 2 visualises the location of all 181 incidents. As demonstrated below, far-right violence clusters around major population centres, and has occurred in every capital city across Australia. While Figure 2 does not immediately highlight any specific city or region as particularly problematic, it is worth analysing this information in more detail.

Figure 2 – Australian Incidents by Location



Seventy-six percent of all incidents occurred within Australia's three most populous states. As these states host approximately 77 percent of Australia's total population, these results are somewhat unsurprising. The Northern Territory and Queensland do have a marginally higher share of incidents than their share of population, while South Australia and NSW have a marginally lower share. However, given the small number of incidents, not too much can be read into these small variations. But when incidents are broken down between metropolitan and regional areas, two locations appear significant.

Table 4 – Incidents by Location and Compared to Population

State	Capital city	Regional	Total	Percentage	% of population ^{###}
Victoria	41	7	48	26%	25% (6,593,300)
Queensland	14	31	45	25%	21% (5,296,100)
New South Wales	26	18	44	25%	31% (8,130,100)
Western Australia	14	7	21	12%	11% (2,773,400)
Northern Territory	4	4	8	4%	1% (250,400)
South Australia	6	0	6	3%	7% (1,815,500)
Tasmania	6	0	6	3%	2% (571,200)
Australian Capital Territory	3	0	3	2%	2% (455,900)
Total	114 (63%)	67 (37%)	181	100%	25,890,000 approx.

In terms of both total incidents, and events relative to population, metropolitan Melbourne (the capital of Victoria) emerges as the epicentre of far-right violence in Australia. Almost one quarter of total incidents, including one in four lethal events, occurred at this location. Interestingly, almost 30 percent of metropolitan Melbourne incidents occurred between mid-2007 and the end of 2009. This cluster of events provides further context to the spike in violence previously identified.

In recent years, Melbourne has also been home to some of Australia's most prominent organised far-right groups. Thus, the location often recognised as the most progressive capital city in Australia also appears to be the 'capital' of far-right activism and violence. This finding supports previous research suggesting that while public repression and stigmatisation of far-right actors and opinions may prevent some from joining radical right groups, it may also fuel anger and resentment among the far right and push more hardcore supporters towards increasingly extreme and violent actions.¹²⁵ This phenomenon is perhaps best illustrated historically in the emergence of Black Vienna during the early 20th century.¹²⁶ It is therefore unfortunate that the Victorian Government's recent inquiry into far-right extremism did not explore the prevalence of far-right violence in Victoria (and who may be committing it), or more critically analyse how government messaging might be impacting levels of far-right activism and violence.

^{###} Approximate population estimates are from the Australian Bureau of Statistics - March 2022. See <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/national-state-and-territory-population/latest-release>.

While large cities predictably produced clusters of violence, more than one in three incidents occurred within regional locations, including five of the 16 fatal events. In particular, North Queensland (including far-North Queensland) emerged as particularly significant. Although this area is relatively sparsely populated and geographically enormous, North Queensland accounts for more than 17 percent of total violence. A cluster of incidents is also clearly identifiable in this area between January 1997 and December 1999. Interestingly, the regional areas surrounding Melbourne experienced a comparatively low number of events. Overall though, incidents occurring in regional areas appear to significantly outpace their expected share of violence (relative to population size). Given the lack of media and policing resources dedicated to regional locations, these figures also potentially underestimate the problem. Hence there is a clear need to better understand far-right violence in regional areas throughout Australia, particularly in North Queensland.

Discussion

Since the conclusion of the National Inquiry into Racist Violence in 1991, the prevalence of serious right-wing violence and terrorism in Australia is largely unknown. Despite vast sums of money being invested into understanding and countering violent extremism,¹²⁷ there remains no systematic national method to monitor right-wing violence (a key recommendation from 1991). Consequently, government agencies, academics, and media pundits have regularly been able to announce increases in violence, without also having to provide any longitudinal evidence by which to have these claims judged. Based on the highly-regarded RTV dataset, this study has provided an evidence base by which such statements can now be assessed.

While there has been an evolution in the type and targets of violence in Australia over time, this study has demonstrated that no clear increase in serious right-wing violence has occurred in recent years. A clear spike in violent incidents was identified between January 2005 and the end of 2009. This surge may have been related to the arrest of the country's first 'homegrown' Jihadists in 2005, an event that sparked much public debate regarding the role of immigration and immigrants. Research comparing this spike in violence to what occurred in Canada following the arrest of the Toronto 18, or in the UK following the 7/7 bombings, may shed further light into this hypothesis. Further research is also clearly required to understand why events decreased from 2010 onwards. Regardless of the specific drivers, a key takeaway is that between January 2010 and December 2020 there was a complete absence of fatal right-wing violence, and a notable reduction in violent incidents across most years.

This paper did identify an increase in terrorist plots in recent times, mirroring findings from Western Europe.¹²⁸ Still it remains difficult to determine whether these events indicate a growth in planned mass-casualty attacks by right-wing actors, or if these arrests are indicative of an increase in government attention (and an increased willingness of police to intervene earlier) following the 2019 Christchurch attack. Initial evidence from this study would suggest the latter, and does not support claims of an 'increasing' threat of far-right violence in Australia. However, further research comparing the maturity of recently foiled far-right plots, to violence planned and perpetrated by Jihadist actors, would assist in making a more fulsome assessment.

Only a vanishingly small number of violent incidents were perpetrated by those associated with organised far-right groups. While such associations were common throughout the 1980s, serious violence affiliated with far-right groups has been almost nonexistent across the past 20 years. This indicates that research into modern Australian far-right groups is largely disconnected from research into far-right violence. Notably, this is the complete opposite of what has occurred with Australian Jihadist violence. Here the study of Australian Jihadist groups and Australian Jihadist violence heavily overlaps, as more than 90 percent of incidents have been planned or perpetrated by those affiliated with groups such as al-Qaeda or ISIS.¹²⁹ This suggests that while prescribing groups as ‘terrorist’ organisations may be useful for combating Jihadists, this action would likely have a very limited effect on reducing levels of right-wing violence in Australia. Other responses are clearly required.

The vast majority of right-wing attacks appear to have come from lone actors or small unorganised groups perpetrating spontaneous violence using readily available (or no) weaponry. Current methods for policing and prosecuting violent extremist activity almost entirely overlook this more chronic form of violence, as do media outlets and policymakers, who tend to focus on highly idiosyncratic and spectacular incidents of premeditated violence that are not representative of the overwhelming majority of cases. A similar phenomenon is seen with Jihadist violence, highlighting the importance of methodologically rigorous and well-maintained databases to source information.

One positive finding was that zero mass casualty attacks occurred across the period studied. This may be related to the fact that only 7 percent of incidents involved the use (or planned use) of firearms. Where firearms were actually used in a realised attack, these weapons were only of a low calibre and limited capacity, lessening the potential for significant casualties. A small number of planned attacks also appear to have been detected as perpetrators attempted to procure firearms. Hence, high levels of firearm regulation have almost certainly helped to identify (and in turn prevent) planned attacks, and have likely reduced casualties when attacks have occurred. Relatedly, the Christchurch attacker appears to have chosen New Zealand (at least in part) to access firearms not readily available in Australia. Moving forward, the strict regulation of firearms, particularly the banning of high-calibre rifles such as those used in the Christchurch or Utøya attacks, should be considered a key pillar of Australian counter-terrorism efforts.

Indigenous Australians have not traditionally been recognised as victims of violent extremist activity, despite being the most frequent target of right-wing violence in Australia. This community was the victim of almost one in every four attacks committed across the past three decades, including 50 percent of fatal incidents. This finding has implications for scholarly understandings of the far right, and what nativist views of society mean when applied to settler colonialist states with Indigenous populations. Moreover, while CVE efforts are often focused towards religious and ethnic minorities with well-organised advocacy groups, this study indicates that Indigenous communities need to be given a more prominent voice in such discussions—particularly in more regional locations, where more than one in three incidents have occurred.

That right-wing violence has been spread across all major Australian cities and regional centres has significant implications for CT efforts. Australia's CT infrastructure was primarily constructed to address a Jihadist threat which is highly networked, geographically concentrated in Melbourne and Sydney, and linked transnationally. While metropolitan Melbourne experienced the highest number of far-right events, less than 40 percent of total incidents occurred within the country's two largest cities. Right-wing violence is a much more geographically diffuse phenomenon. Whether the post Christchurch focus of CT agencies on far-right actors can be effectively deployed to combat this geographically decentralised and unorganised threat is highly questionable. While existing practices will likely identify targets associated with organised groups in major metropolitan locations, this study has demonstrated that such actors are not those most likely to commit right-wing violence.

Addressing the hundreds of right-wing perpetrators identified in this study would also require more agile and less centralised CVE programs, incorporating a wider range of existing services. However, conducting individually tailored interventions with far-right actors would likely be a more effective use of CVE resources than existing programs intended to build resilience or prevent violence across entire communities. To date, such prevention efforts remain largely unable to demonstrate any impact on the problem of violent extremism in Australia,¹³⁰ and building social cohesion or increasing resilience remains "more the role of cultural metaphor than ... a well-developed scientific concept."¹³¹

Conclusion

This work has documented incidents of far-right terrorism and violence that occurred in Australia between 1990 and the end of 2020 and questions the prevailing logic that right-wing violence is increasing. Tracking incidents across a three-decade period has allowed conclusions to be made regarding right-wing violence that are grounded in data and able to be compared to other Western countries. This evidence has shown that while increasing attention may be focused on the far right post-Christchurch, in Australia, serious incidents of right-wing violence have not increased in either frequency or severity across recent years. Rather, this study has demonstrated an almost complete reduction in fatal violence across the last decade. Though headline worthy, whether or not instances of violence increase or decrease across any particular year is potentially not the most helpful question. Instead, it is important to recognise where and how this violence is occurring and analyse whether Australia's existing CT and CVE infrastructure can be effectively deployed to combat the chronic violence that continues to manifest. Ultimately, this may require reducing the hyperfocus on far-right groups with prominent branding and rhetoric, and reallocating resources towards combating those extreme-right actors that actually engage in violence.

This study has also confirmed that far-right violence is a context-dependent phenomenon and that the problem manifests in unique ways within and across Australia. Future research should aim to better understand why violence has evolved in particular ways in Australia over time. Studies that report a spike in right-wing violence in Australia in future years should also be read with significant caution. Much of the country spent large parts of 2020 and 2021 in strict

COVID-19-related lockdowns — hence any ‘increase’ in violent events across 2021 or 2022 should be understood in the context of increased public interaction following the lifting of significant social restrictions. These specific circumstances may cause a blip in the data. Moving forward, statements regarding trends in right-wing violence should be made within historical context, rather than focusing on any one particular year or event in isolation. While the data presented here may be imperfect, they provide a basis by which such judgements can now be made.

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