

AUSTRALIAN BORDER DEATHS DATABASE

Annual report on border-related deaths, 2017

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BORDER CROSSING
OBSERVATORY
BORDERS, CRIME, JUSTICE

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Year of death by border location

Year	En-route	Australian waters	Offshore detention	Onshore detention	Death in community	During arrest/dep	After deportation	TOTAL
2000	370	3	0	1	0	0	0	374
2001	358	3	0	4	1	0	0	366
2002	0	0	1	2	0	0	6	9
2003	0	0	1	2	1	0	0	4
2004	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	2
2005	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	3
2006	0	0	0	0	0	1	12	13
2007	12	0	0	0	0	0	1	13
2008	0	0	0	2	0	0	1	3
2009	114	17	0	0	0	0	1	132
2010	97	55	0	4	0	0	0	156
2011	231	0	0	4	0	0	0	235
2012	417	1	0	3	0	0	0	421
2013	121	110	2	4	1	0	0	238
2014	0	0	2	2	2	0	0	6
2015	0	0	1	2	4	0	0	7
2016	0	0	5	1	4	0	0	10
2017	0	0	3	1	1	0	1	6
Unknown	0	0	0	0	0	0	11	11
TOTAL	1720	189	15	35	15	2	33	2009

Overview of border-related deaths in 2017

The predominant features of the border-related deaths recorded on The Australian Border Deaths Database in 2017 are the absence of known deaths at sea, the cluster of deaths on Manus Island, and the deaths associated with criminal deportation under s501 of the Migration Act. The six deaths in 2017 all involved adult men. Four of the deaths occurred while in custody, three of them on Manus Island. Two of the fatalities were Iranians, two New Zealand citizens, one Sri Lankan asylum seeker and one Bangladeshi asylum seeker. Both New Zealanders were subject to s501 deportation, having been convicted of a criminal offence whilst living in Australia. It is known that one of the New Zealanders, Matthew Taylor, had lived in Australia for many years. He committed suicide in New Zealand, 18 months after having been deported. The other New Zealander, whose name is unknown to us, was found hanged in Maribyrnong Immigration Detention Centre. An Iranian man Majid Hassanloo died from a suspected drug overdose in Sydney sometime during the first week of July. It is not clear from our source data if Mr Hassanloo was released into community detention (and therefore arguably a 'death in custody') or if he held a bridging visa. His brother Saeed (who died in August 2016) had been released on a Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV). Another Iranian man, Hamed Shamshiripour, was found dead near the East Lorengau Refugee Transit Centre on Manus Island. A second man of Sri Lankan origin also died in the grounds of the transit centre, suspected of having taken his own life. The final death also occurred on Manus Island, involving a Bangladeshi man living at the transit centre who died in a motor cycle accident. For information on all recorded deaths related to Australian border controls since 2000 visit [The Australian Border Deaths Database](#).

Special Analysis: Are Australia's pre-emptive border controls necessary to save lives?

Successive Australian governments have argued that harsh measures such as interdiction at sea and indefinite detention of asylum seeking men, women and children in offshore locations are necessary in order to save lives. Data from the Australian Border Deaths Database does confirm that known border-related deaths decreased substantially from 2014 onwards, coinciding with the reintroduction by the Coalition government in September 2013 of military interdiction via [Operation Sovereign Borders](#). Prior to that, irregular boat arrivals, and deaths, had continued even after the reintroduction of offshore detention by the Labor government in August 2012 under the '[No Advantage Policy](#)', which relied on deterrence to 'disrupt the people smugglers business model'.

So is the current government justified in concluding that their policies, which combine both interdiction and deterrence, are necessary to prevent loss of life at sea? This utilitarian argument can be unpacked using a style of moral analysis based on the 'Dirty Harry scenario'. According to this framework, doing something known to be morally wrong (such as subjecting unconvicted people to indefinite detention or risking their lives by turning them back at sea) is only justifiable if it satisfies the following conditions:

1. Someone has the opportunity to achieve some morally good end or outcome, and they aim to do so.
2. The means they use to achieve this good end are normally morally wrong i.e. they are 'dirty'.
3. These means are the best or perhaps the only practicable way of ensuring that this good end is realised.
4. The good likely to be achieved by using the dirty means far outweighs the evil likely to follow.

At the Border Crossing Observatory we have concluded that, even allowing that the first condition were true, pre-emptive policies fail on the crucial third condition, since alternative ways could be found to reduce the risk of death during asylum seeking journeys if the preservation of life were really driving policy. Moreover, in considering condition four, better regional knowledge is needed to determine whether deaths have merely been displaced elsewhere. In our view, the harm of Australia's offshore border controls cannot be justified in order to save lives. A longer version of this argument has been published as an opinion piece that can be accessed [here](#).

The Australian Border Deaths Database Interpretive Notes

- There is no official count of border-related deaths in Australia. [The Australian Border Deaths Database](#) was established as part of the research for [Globalization and Borders: Death at the Global Frontier](#) (Weber and Pickering, Palgrave, 2011) in order to fill this gap. The database is hosted at the Border Crossing Observatory at Monash University. The Observatory receives no external funds for this purpose, and the data is maintained voluntarily as part of our ongoing research effort.
- The database records all reported deaths associated with Australian border controls since 1 January 2000. The information is obtained primarily from media reports, which are cross-referenced where possible with official reports from governments, verified information from non-governmental organizations and coronial inquiries. The data is updated as fatalities are reported, and other data sources are used from time to time to cross-check the list.
- We adopt a broad definition of ‘border-related death’ that includes deaths while en route to Australia (both inside and outside Australia’s border surveillance zone), while in onshore or offshore detention, during border enforcement operations, in community contexts where there is direct evidence of a link to border control (for example, suicides following receipt of rejection letters or in protest against border policies) and following return to countries of origin or transit (in the rare cases where this is reported).
- Categorisation of the fatalities sometimes requires inferences to be made from scant information. It is often difficult to discern from reports whether fatalities at sea occurred within or beyond Australia’s border surveillance zone. Information on age, nationality and gender is often missing from reports, but can sometimes be pieced together from general narratives. Names are often missing, particularly for deaths at sea where no body has been recovered and no coronial inquiry conducted.
- Deaths are classified by us as ‘in custody’ where they occur in custodial detention settings, during apprehension by police or immigration authorities on the mainland, or during interdiction at sea where border protection personnel have taken control of a vessel. This classification is for statistical purposes only and does not necessarily correspond to the official handling of these deaths as deaths in custody.
- Every effort has been made to make the data as accurate as possible. However, the process of counting border-related deaths is greatly complicated by the circumstances of unregulated travel and the climate of secrecy which surrounds it. Historically, most deaths have occurred at sea under circumstances where verification of information is extremely difficult. Other deaths that occur in countries of origin following removal or deportation from Australia may be equally difficult to trace, and deaths in countries of transit amongst those whose onward travel has been prevented by Australia’s offshore border controls remain completely invisible. The data should therefore be considered to capture only known deaths, rather than all deaths that could be related in some way to Australian border controls.

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