

AUSTRALIAN BORDER DEATHS DATABASE

Annual report on border-related deaths, 2019

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BORDER CROSSING
OBSERVATORY
BORDERS, CRIME, JUSTICE

<https://www.monash.edu/arts/border-crossing-observatory/home>

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	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
2008	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	4
2009	114	17	0	0	0	0	1	132
2010	109	55	0	4	0	0	0	168
2011	231	0	0	4	0	0	0	235
2012	417	1	0	3	0	0	0	421
2013	121	110	2	5	1	1	0	240
2014	0	0	3	2	2	0	0	7
2015	0	0	1	4	5	0	0	10
2016	0	0	4	1	6	0	0	11
2017	0	0	3	0	1	0	1	5
2018	0	0	2	1	1	0	0	4
2019	0	0	0	3	3	0	1	7
Unknown	0	0	0	0	0	0	11	11
TOTAL	1720	189	17	41	22	3	34	2026

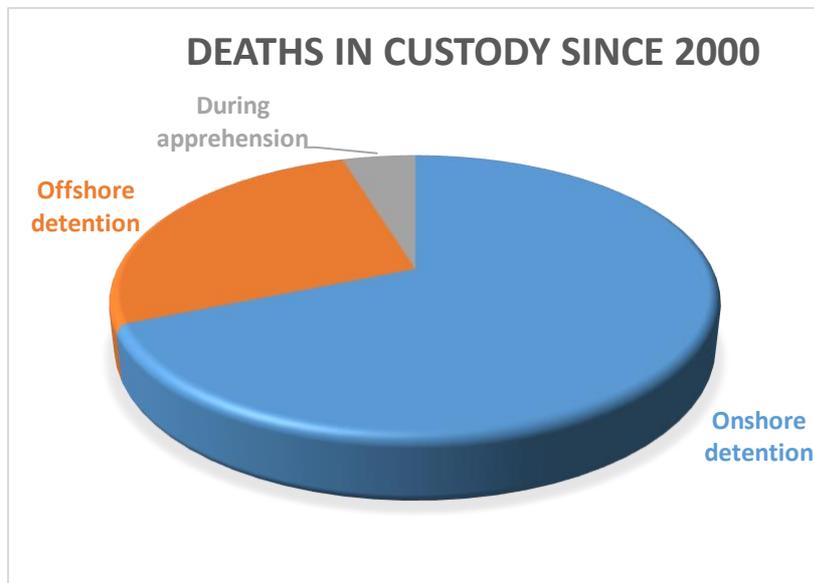
Note that slight changes in some figures published in the 2018 report are due to additions and corrections being made to the source data as new information comes to light.

Overview of border-related deaths in 2019

The number of deaths recorded on the Australian Border Deaths Database increased from 4 in 2018, to 7 in 2019. All but one of these deaths occurred on Australian territory, three of them in custody and three in the community. While there were no deaths in offshore detention, one overseas death was identified as a result of a stabbing attack following deportation to Vietnam. Of the three deaths in immigration detention, two were considered to be cases of suicide. The three deaths in the community were all suspected suicides of asylum seekers who had been living in the community on bridging visas for extended periods of time, at least one of whom was facing removal to his country of origin (Sri Lanka). For information on all recorded deaths related to Australian border controls since 2000 visit [The Australian Border Deaths Database](#).

Special Analysis: Deaths in custody

Excluding deaths during interception at sea, sixty four deaths in custody have been recorded on the Australian Border Deaths database since 2000. The majority of these (44) occurred in onshore detention, 17 occurred in offshore detention, and the remaining three happened during apprehension by police or immigration authorities. In line with the definition of 'in custody' adopted by the [National Deaths in Custody](#) (NDIC) monitoring program



administered by the Australian Institute of Criminology, deaths that occur outside of closed detention may also be counted as 'in custody' where individuals are under the control of law enforcement officials. At present the NDIC only covers deaths in prison and police custody. The Border Crossing Observatory has [long advocated](#) that deaths in immigration custody should be included in this national count, as a matter of equity and completeness, to ensure that *all* deaths in custody are maintained

within one comprehensive system. While *counting* is important as an act of recognition, it is only the first step towards achieving greater *accountability* in the immigration detention system. A secondary benefit of including deaths in immigration detention within the same monitoring system as deaths in criminal justice contexts, is that recognition of a death as being 'in custody' should normally trigger a coronial inquest. Coronial procedures are complex and vary state by state. Of the 41 deaths in custody that occurred on the Australian mainland, 24 resulted in a coronial investigation. Deaths that occur in places of offshore detention fall outside the jurisdiction of state coroners. The only exceptions have been deaths that occurred in Australia following medical transfer from offshore detention. Examples include Omid Masoumali, who died in a Brisbane hospital from burns he inflicted while detained on Nauru, and [Hamid Khazaei](#), who was belatedly transferred to Brisbane from Manus Island while suffering from sepsis. In Hamid Khazaei's case, [State Coroner Terry Ryan](#) found the death to have been preventable, and identified aspects of offshore detention that had contributed to the deaths. In contrast, when Reza Berati was killed during an outbreak of violence at Manus Island, no Australian coroner had jurisdiction to investigate, an issue addressed by State Coroner Terry Ryan in his recommendations following Hamid Khazaei's death. While two local guards were eventually convicted of the death, and an Australian [Senate Inquiry](#) was conducted, Australian personnel who were suspected of involvement escaped prosecution, leaving commentators with a sense that [justice had not been served](#).

Further reading:

Powell, R, Weber, L and Pickering, S (2015) '[Every death counts: An argument for counting deaths in immigration custody in the national deaths in custody collection](#)' *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 27(1), pp. 113-121.

Powell, R, Weber, L and S Pickering (2013) '[Counting and Accounting for Deaths in Australian Immigration Custody](#)' *Homicide Studies* 17(4) pp. 391 – 417, Special Issue on Fatality and Death Reviews

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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