

AUSTRALIAN BORDER DEATHS DATABASE

Annual report on border-related deaths, 2020

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BORDER CROSSING
OBSERVATORY
BORDERS, CRIME, JUSTICE

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

Year of death by border location 1 Jan 2000 – 31 Dec 2020

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
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	4	0	0	9
2016	0	0	5	2	4	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	4	3	0	1	8
2020	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	4
Unknown	0	0	0	0	0	0	11	11
TOTAL	1720	189	17	44	23	3	34	2030

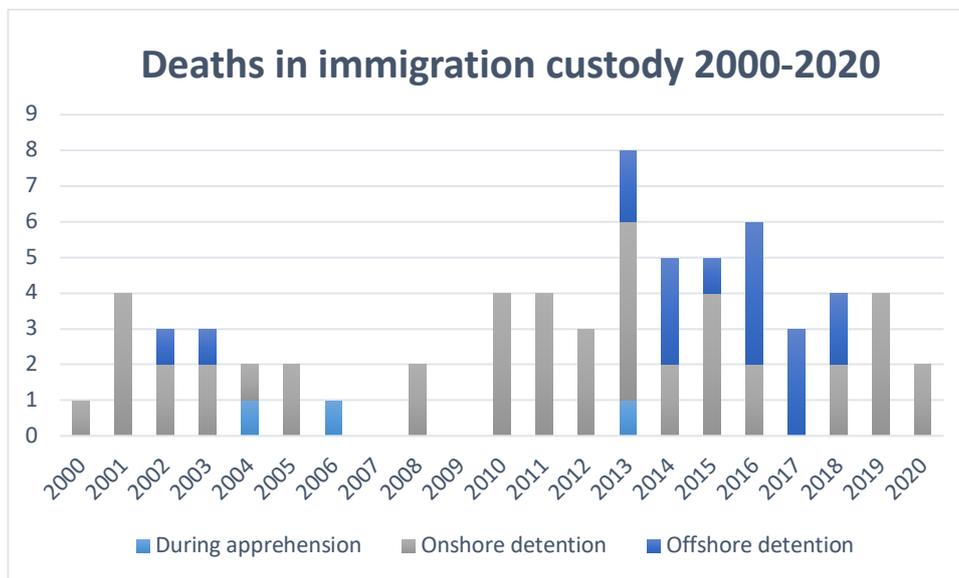
Note that slight changes in some figures published in the 2019 report are due to additions and corrections being made to the source data as new information comes to light.

Overview of border-related deaths in 2020

With the number of asylum seekers held in offshore detention now greatly reduced, all the deaths recorded on the database in 2020 occurred on the Australian mainland. Two men died while awaiting deportation in immigration custody, one from Malaysia and one from New Zealand. The cause of death was not reported at the time but both deaths were the subject of coronial enquiries. The two deaths that occurred in the community involved asylum seekers – one from Iran and the other from Sri Lanka – who took their own lives after they were denied protection visas. Neither of these deaths was reported in the media. They were reported to the Australian Border Deaths Database by community informants. These deaths remind us that remaining within the community on bridging visas with insecure legal status and insufficient financial and social support continues to place asylum seekers at high risk. For information on all recorded deaths related to Australian border controls since 2000 visit [The Australian Border Deaths Database](#).

Why we need an official record of deaths in immigration custody

Excluding deaths during interception at sea, 66 deaths in custody have now been recorded on the Australian Border Deaths database since 2000. The majority of these (46) occurred in onshore detention, 17 occurred in offshore detention, and three deaths happened during apprehension by police or immigration authorities.



Over the past 20 years, deaths during apprehension have been sporadic and we are not aware that any deaths have occurred during deportation. Deaths in offshore detention have coincided with high numbers of boat arrivals and the long periods of detention that have followed. Deaths in onshore detention, including asylum seekers and individuals facing deportation on immigration or criminal grounds, have been a relatively steady feature throughout the 20-year period and will continue to be a concern given the increased use of visa cancellation following criminal convictions, and the government's stated intention to deny settlement to certain cohorts of asylum seekers currently living within the community.

We believe these deaths should be subject to official recording and monitoring at a national level, as is the case with deaths in police and prison custody (see [National Deaths in Custody](#) program). The [National Coronial Information System](#) could be another possible repository for this data. National data is needed in the interests of equity, accountability, and transparency; to acknowledge the value and dignity of human life; and to satisfy the federal government's duty of care for individuals being held in their custody.

Further reading:

[Mytilini Declaration](#) for the Dignified Treatment of all Missing and Deceased Persons
Powell, R, Weber, L & 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 & 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
[Note that the statistics and some legal information in these two articles are now out of date.]

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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