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Boat arrivals and boat ‘turnbacks’ in Australia since 1976: a quick guide to the statistics

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This quick guide provides statistics on the number of asylum seeker boats that have arrived in Australia since 1976 when the first wave of boats carrying people seeking asylum from the aftermath of the Vietnam War began to arrive. The guide also includes the number of boats that have been ‘turned back’ since the practice of removing unauthorised maritime arrivals in Suspected Illegal Entry Vessels (SIEVs) from Australian waters was introduced by the Howard Government in 2001 and reintroduced by the Abbott Government in 2013.

It reproduces and updates the appendices of a more detailed Parliamentary Library Research paper, [Boat arrivals in Australia since 1976](#). The full Research paper includes an overview of the historical and political context surrounding the arrival of asylum seekers by boat, details of Australian Government policy responses since 1976, and trends in public opinion.

It is important to note that, while every effort has been made to ensure consistency, the statistics provided in this guide have been compiled by Parliamentary Library staff over a period of many years from a variety of sources. For example, since 2008 our financial year boat arrival figures have been compiled from ministerial or departmental media releases and transcripts. As not all media releases specify the number of crew members versus passengers, and some boat arrivals may not be subject to ministerial or departmental media releases at all, these figures may differ slightly from other sources. While we are confident our financial year figures accurately reflect available government data, due to the inconsistency of the sources over the years these figures should be regarded as an estimate. However, our calendar year figures between 2009 and 2014 were compiled from a single source—advice provided to the Parliamentary Library by the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service in 2014. As a result, we can have confidence in the consistency and accuracy of that data. Similarly, we are confident that the boat ‘turnback’ details included in this guide between December 2013 and July 2014 are accurate as the information was compiled from an official document tabled after Senate Estimates hearings in October 2014. However, details of individual ‘turnbacks’ after that date are incomplete—the Government has released the total number of ‘turnbacks’ since then on a few occasions, but dates of the individual incidents are not usually included.

Statistics in this guide include:

[Table 1: Boat arrivals since 1976 by calendar year](#)

[Table 2: Boat arrivals since 1976 by financial year](#)

[Graph 1: Boat arrivals by calendar year since 1979 and financial year since 1989–1990](#)

[Table 3: Boat ‘turnbacks’ 2001–2003](#)

[Table 4: Boat ‘turnbacks’ 2013–2015](#)

Table 1: Boat arrivals since 1976 by calendar year

Year	Number of boats	Number of people	
1976		111	
1977		868	
1978		746	
1979		304	
1980		0	
1981		30	
1982–88		0	
Year	Number of boats	Number of people (excludes crew)	
1989	1	26	
1990	2	198	
1991	6	214	
1992	6	216	
1993	3	81	
1994	18	953	
1995	7	237	
1996	19	660	
1997	11	339	
1998	17	200	
1999	86	3721	
2000	51	2939	
2001	43	5516	
2002	1	1	
2003	1	53	
2004	1	15	
2005	4	11	
2006	6	60	
2007	5	148	
2008	7	161	
Year	Number of boats	Crew	Number of people (excludes crew)
2009	60	141	2726
2010	134	345	6555
2011	69	168	4565
2012	278	392	17 204
2013	300	644	20 587
2014	1	N/A	160

Notes: 2014—arrivals include 2 medical transfers on 31 January and 2 February 2014 from SIEV 879 (this boat was reportedly ‘turned back’ and not counted as an arrival); 157 people on board a boat from India intercepted on 27 July 2014 — the passengers were subsequently transferred to Curtin Detention Centre and then to Nauru for processing (this boat was counted as an arrival, but 41 people on board another boat intercepted at the same time were returned to Sri Lankan authorities at sea); and 1 Sri Lankan national on board a boat intercepted on 15 November 2014 who was referred for refugee determination and transferred to Manus Island for processing (the 37 other passengers were transferred at sea to Sri Lankan authorities and the boat was not counted as an ‘arrival’). Unauthorised maritime arrivals from cruise ships are not included in these statistics.

Sources: 1976–1988: K Betts, ‘[Boatpeople and public opinion in Australia](#)’, *People and Place*, 9(4), 2001, p. 34. Numbers of boats and crew members not specified. **1989–2008:** Department of Immigration advice provided to the Parliamentary Library on 22 June 2009 (excludes crew members).

2009–2014: Customs and Border Protection advice provided to the Parliamentary Library on 22 August 2014.

Table 2: Boat arrivals since 1976 by financial year

Year	Number of boats	Number of people	
1975–76	1	5	
1976–77	7	204	
1977–78	43	1423	
1978–79	6	351	
1979–80	2	56	
1980–81	1	30	
1981–82 to 1988–89	0	0	
1989–90	3	224	
1990–91	5	158	
1991–92	3	78	
1992–93	4	194	
1993–94	6	194	
1994–95	21	1071	
1995–96	14	589	
1996–97	13	365	
1997–98	13	157	
1998–99	42	921	
1999–00	75	4175	
2000–01	54	4137	
2001–02	19	3039	
2002–03	0	0	
2003–04	3	82	
2004–05	0	0	
2005–06	8	61	
2006–07	4	133	
2007–08	3	25	
Year	Number of boats*	Number of people (excludes crew)*	Number of people (includes crew)**
2008–09	23	985	1033
2009–10	117	5327	5609
2010–11	89	4730	4940
Year	Number of boats	Crew	Number of people
2011–12	110	190	7983
2012–13	403	423	25 173
2013–14	104	198	7674
2014–15	1	N/A	158

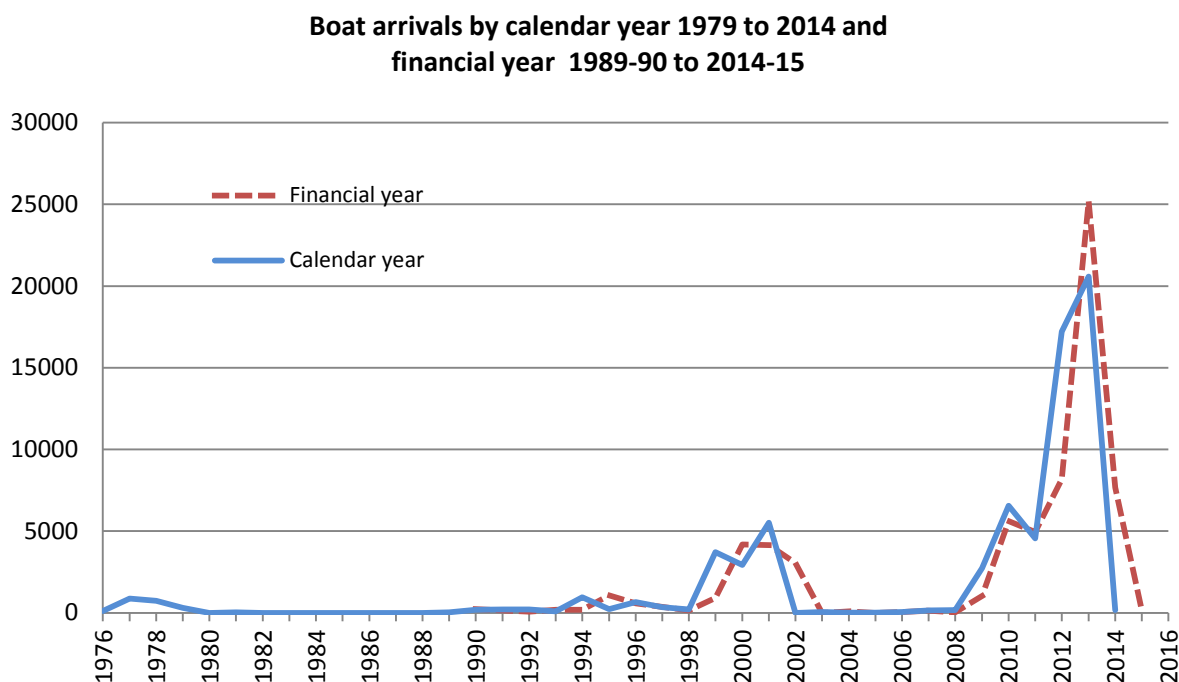
Notes:

- Data from 2001–02 onwards includes arrivals at both excised and non-excised places, but excludes boats returned from whence they came (boat turnarounds).
- Deaths at sea in Australian waters may or may not be included in the figures provided by the Department of Immigration, but are included in figures compiled by the authors. Deaths include 5 deceased at sea 16 April 2009; 12 deceased at sea 1 November 2009; 1 crew member who allegedly drowned on 20 November 2011; and the estimated 48 who drowned during the boat tragedy on 15 December 2010 where a boat sank on approach to Christmas Island (42 people were rescued, 30 bodies were recovered and an estimated 18 people drowned). For further details see M Hutton, [‘Drownings on the public record of people attempting to enter Australia irregularly by boat since 1998’](#), sievx.com website, last updated 2 February 2014.
- Arrival figures do not include: two arrivals in an ‘esky’ on 17 January 2009; four on Deliverance Island with no boat on 29 April 2009; and 78 on board MV *Oceanic Viking* intercepted in Indonesian waters in November 2009.

Sources:

- **1975–76 to 2007–08:** Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), [Supplementary Submission](#) to the *Joint Select Committee on Australia’s Immigration Detention Network inquiry*, submission no. 32, Figure 2, p. 18, 1 September 2011. Numbers of crew members not specified or not included.
- **2008–09 to 2010–11:** *Ibid. (excludes crew members); and **figures compiled from ministerial and departmental press releases (includes crew members).
- **2011–12:** figures compiled from ministerial and departmental press releases. Figures include 10 Chinese asylum seekers attempting to travel to New Zealand by boat in April 2012 who were taken to Darwin after making a distress call and the 18 deceased recovered midway between Christmas Island and Indonesia by Australian search and rescue vessels on 21 and 27 June 2012.
- **2012–13:** figures compiled from ministerial and departmental press releases. Figures include: 1 deceased on board a vessel which arrived on 15 November 2012; 2 deceased recovered from a vessel which capsized on 25 March; and 9 deceased confirmed, but not recovered, from the water from a vessel which capsized on 7 June 2013.
- **2013–14:** figures compiled from ministerial and departmental press releases. Figures include: 1 deceased infant male recovered from a vessel on 12 July 2013; and 4 deceased recovered from a vessel which capsized 16 July 2013. Figures do not include 5 people believed drowned but not recovered on 20 August 2013.
- **2014–15:** figures compiled from ministerial and departmental press releases. Arrivals include: 157 people on board a boat originating from an Indian port and intercepted on 27 July 2014 —the passengers were subsequently transferred to Curtin Detention Centre and then to Nauru for processing (this boat was counted as an arrival, but 41 people on board another boat intercepted at the same time were returned to Sri Lankan authorities at sea); and 1 Sri Lankan national on board a boat intercepted on 15 November 2014 who was referred for refugee determination and transferred to Manus Island for processing (the 37 other passengers were transferred at sea to Sri Lankan authorities and the boat was not counted as an ‘arrival’). Unauthorised maritime arrivals from cruise ships are not included in these statistics.

Graph 1: Boat arrivals by calendar year since 1979 and financial year since 1989–90



Source: the statistics provided in this guide are represented in graph format above.

Table 3: Boat ‘turnbacks’ 2001–2003

Date	Boats	Crew	Number of people
19 October 2001	1	N/A	238
29 October 2001	1	N/A	215
13 December 2001	1	N/A	14
20 December 2001	1	N/A	133
8 November 2003	1	N/A	14
Total	5	N/A	614

Notes:

The practice of removing unauthorised maritime arrivals in Suspected Illegal Entry Vessels (SIEVs) from Australian waters was introduced by the Howard Government in 2001 and reintroduced by the Abbott Government in 2013. Detailed information on the date of every incident since 2001 is not available, but statistics on the total number of boat ‘turnbacks’ over certain periods has been made public on occasion. During the Howard Government five boats were turned around. For more detail on boat ‘turnback’ policies since 2001 see J Phillips, [A comparison of Coalition and Labor Government asylum policies in Australia since 2001](#), Research paper series, 2013–14, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 28 February 2014.

Sources:

M Hutton, ‘[Boats carrying asylum seekers returned to Indonesia under Operation Relex and Operation Sovereign Borders](#)’, sievx.com website, last updated 19 March 2014; Andrew and Renata Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law, [Turning back boats](#), Fact sheet, University of New South Wales, 26 February 2015; and Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee, Answers to Questions on Notice, Defence Portfolio, Budget Estimates 2006–07, Department of Defence answers, [Question W19](#), pp. 34–5, November 2006.

Table 4: Boat ‘turnbacks’ 2013–2015

Date	Boats	Crew	Number of people
December 2013–July 2014			
19 December 2013	1	2	47
24 December 2013	1	1	49
28 December 2013	1	2	38
6 January 2014	1	2	45
8 January 2014	1	2	25
15 January 2014	1	2	56
5 February 2014	1	2	36
24 February 2014	1	2	26
4 May 2014	1	2	18
4 May 2014	1	1	2
20 May 2014	1	2	1
6 July 2014	**1	1	40
July 2014–August 2015			
27 November 2014	**1	N/A	37
9 February 2015	**1	N/A	4
17 February 2015	**1	N/A	N/A
22 March 2015	1	N/A	N/A
18 April 2015	***1	N/A	46
June 2015	1	N/A	N/A
July 2015	***1	N/A	N/A
Total	20	N/A	633

Total number provided in a [ministerial press release](#) on 6 August 2015

Details on 19 of the 20 are publicly available and included above

Notes:

- The terms boat ‘turnbacks’, ‘take-backs’, ‘turnarounds’ or ‘pushbacks’ are often used interchangeably. [Operation Sovereign Borders](#) (OSB), established by the Abbott Government in 2013, defines ‘turnbacks’ as ‘the safe removal of vessels from Australian waters, with passengers and crew returned to their countries of departure’; and ‘take-backs’ as a transfer (often at sea) of passengers from one sovereign authority to another ‘where Australia works with a country of departure in order to see the safe return of passengers and crew’. Sources: Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee, [Official committee Hansard](#), 25 May 2015, pp. 107–10; and [Official committee Hansard](#), 23 February 2015, p. 137.
- **‘Take-backs’ (transfers at sea) to Sri Lankan authorities; and ***‘take-backs’ of Vietnamese nationals to Vietnamese authorities. Sources: Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee, Answers to Questions on Notice, Immigration Portfolio, Additional Estimates 2014–15, [Question AE15/175](#) and [Question AE15/055](#), 23 February 2015; Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee, [Official committee Hansard](#), 25 May 2015, op. cit.; and P Dutton (Minister for Immigration and Border Protection), [OSB marks milestone—year with no boats](#), media release, 6 August 2015.
- The Abbott Government announced its decision not to release details of ‘on-water’ matters conducted by Operation Sovereign Borders in November 2013—see S Morrison (Minister for Immigration and Border Protection), [Operation Sovereign Borders update](#), transcript of press conference, 8 November 2013. Although detailed information on each boat ‘turnback’ is not always available, there have been several ministerial or departmental statements providing total number of ‘turnbacks’ or ‘take-backs’. For example:
 - ‘12 ventures, with 383 people on board have been turned back at sea’—S Morrison (Minister for Immigration and Border Protection), [A year of stronger borders](#), media release, 18 September 2014.
 - ‘Up until today 15 ventures with 429 potential illegal immigrants aboard have been intercepted and returned’—P Dutton, (Minister for Immigration and Border Protection), [Operation Sovereign Borders delivers six months without a successful people smuggling venture](#), media release, 28 January 2015.
 - ‘Since Operation Sovereign Borders commenced on 18 September 2013 through to now 18 people smuggling ventures have been safely and successfully returned’— Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee, [Official committee Hansard](#), 25 May 2015, p. 107.
 - ‘Since December 2013, OSB has safely returned 633 potential illegal arrivals aboard 20 ventures to their countries of departure’—P Dutton (Minister for Immigration and Border Protection), [OSB marks milestone—year with no boats](#), media release, 6 August 2015.

Sources:

- **December 2013—July 2014:** Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee, Immigration Portfolio, Supplementary Budget Estimates 2014–15, 20 October 2014, *Suspected illegal entry ventures removed from Australian waters*, [Tabled document 6](#).
- **July 2014—August 2015:** Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee, [Official committee Hansard](#), 25 May 2015, op. cit.; [Official committee Hansard](#), 23 February 2015, op. cit.; Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee, Answers to Questions on Notice, Immigration Portfolio, Additional Estimates 2014–15, [Question AE15/175](#) and [Question AE15/055](#), 23 February 2015; ministerial/departmental press releases; and media reports.

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