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Boat ‘turnbacks’ in Australia: a quick guide to the statistics since 2001

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This guide provides statistics on 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 (from 2001–2003) and reintroduced by the Abbott Government (in December 2013). It updates boat ‘turnback’ data provided in another Parliamentary Library publication, [Boat arrivals and boat ‘turnbacks’ in Australia since 1976: a quick guide to the statistics](#) (January 2017).

In the months prior to the reintroduction of the Abbott Government’s boat ‘turnback’ policy, unauthorised maritime arrivals (that arrived on board boats between [19 July 2013](#) and December 2013) were transferred to regional processing centres in Nauru and Papua New Guinea (PNG). As at 27 February 2017, 3127 people had been transferred since 19 July 2013 (source: Senate Estimates answers to [questions on notice](#), 27 February 2017, specifically [AE17/170](#), [AE17/171](#) and [AE17/172](#)). For more background on this cohort see the Parliamentary Library publication, [Australia’s offshore processing of asylum seekers in Nauru and PNG: a quick guide to statistics and resources](#) (2016); and [The ‘Pacific Solution’ revisited: a statistical guide to the asylum seeker caseloads on Nauru and Manus Island](#) (2012) for details on the asylum cohorts processed offshore during the Howard Government.

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, 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, later details and exact dates of individual ‘turnbacks’ are incomplete. The Australian Government has released the total number of ‘turnbacks’ on a few occasions, but dates of the individual incidents are not usually included. Other information is supplied in monthly Operation Sovereign Borders (OSB) [operational updates](#) and media releases, but exact dates are also not usually provided in these briefs. The dates included in this guide have largely been provided in Senate Estimates hearings.

Statistics in this guide include:

[Table 1: Boat ‘turnbacks’ 2001–2003](#)

[Table 2: Boat ‘turnbacks’ since 2013](#)

Table 1: 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, 2016–17, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2 February 2017.

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 2: Boat ‘turnbacks’ since 2013

Note: exact dates are provided where possible

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
September 2015–October 2016			
September 2015	1	N/A	21
November 2015	2	N/A	N/A
February 2016	1	N/A	N/A

March 2016	**1	N/A	6
May 2016	**1	N/A	12
June 2016	***1	N/A	21
16 August 2016	**1	N/A	6
March 2017	**1	N/A	25
Total	30	N/A	765

Source: '30 people smuggling boats and more than 765 people'—P Dutton (Minister for Immigration and Border Protection), [1000 days of strong and secure borders](#), media release, 23 April 2017

Details on 28 of the 30 vessels are publicly available and included in this table

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.
 - 'Since December 2013, 25 boats carrying 698 people have tried to reach Australia'—P Dutton (Minister for Immigration and Border Protection), [Boats stopped—threats constant](#), media release, 18 March 2016.
 - 'Since OSB began, 26 boats carrying 710 people have been turned back and safely returned to their country of departure'—P Dutton (Minister for Immigration and Border Protection), [The border and beyond Australia's 21st century border security system](#), speech at 13th National Security Annual Summit, Canberra, 11 May 2016.
 - M Turnbull (Prime Minister), doorstop interview [transcript](#), Bungalow QLD, 23 June 2016—noted 734 passengers in 28 boats had been turned back since 2013.
 - One further boat identified by P Dutton (Minister for Immigration and Border Protection), [People smuggling boat returned to Sri Lanka](#), media release, 17 August 2016. On 17 October 2016, these figures were [confirmed](#) in Senate Estimates (a total of 740 people from 29 vessels had been returned to their country of departure since December 2013).
 - 'In the past 1000 days, Operation Sovereign Borders has intercepted and returned 30 people smuggling boats and more than 765 people'— P Dutton (Minister for Immigration and Border Protection), [1000 days of strong and secure borders](#), media release, 23 April 2017.

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.
- **September 2015—March 2017:** M Turnbull (Prime Minister), doorstep interview [transcript](#), Bungalow QLD, 23 June 2016 (confirmed that 21 people had been taken back to Vietnam in June 2016); P Dutton (Minister for Immigration and Border Protection), press conference [transcript](#), Brisbane, 9 May 2016 (confirmed 12 people who had arrived near the Cocos Islands had been taken back to Sri Lanka on 6 May 2016); P Dutton (Minister for Immigration and Border Protection), [People smuggling boat returned to Sri Lanka](#), media release, 17 August 2016; and media reports. October 2016 update provided in Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee, *Official committee Hansard*, Immigration and Border Protection portfolio, Supplementary Budget Estimates 2016–17, [17 October 2016](#), p. 45 (it was confirmed that the total of 29 boats included the interception of 4 vessels with 42 persons on board since the previous Senate Estimates hearings in May 2016). In an OSB March 2017 [operational update](#) it was confirmed that one vessel with 25 people on board had been intercepted and the passengers returned to Sri Lankan authorities.

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