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Femicide: An Overview of Major Findings

Jenny Mouzos

On average, 125 females of all ages are murdered each year in Australia, with the greatest risk of homicide victimisation for females being between the ages of 21 and 23 years. Overwhelmingly, it is men who kill women—male offenders were responsible for killing approximately 94 per cent of adult female victims. However, the likelihood of a woman being killed by a male stranger is very slight—each year in Australia fewer than 14 women are killed by a man that they do not know.

Nearly three in five of all femicides, defined here as the killing of women aged 15 years and over, occur between intimate partners, and nearly all of these are as a result of a domestic altercation. When a woman is killed, she is most likely to be killed in a private residence. These and other factors that may contribute to the likelihood of a woman being killed in Australia are presented in full in a Research and Public Policy series report from the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) entitled Femicide: The Killing of Women in Australia 1989–1998.

Adam Graycar
Director

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Australian Institute
of Criminology
GPO Box 2944
Canberra ACT 2601
Australia

Tel: 02 6260 9200

Fax: 02 6260 9201

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Trends in the Homicide of Females

In general, females are at a consistently lower risk of homicide victimisation than males (Mouzos 1999). During the period under review, females in Australia were killed at an average annual rate of 1.4 per 100,000 population and males at an average annual rate of 2.4 per 100,000 population. There has been a slight declining trend in the number of female homicide victims per year—the annual number of female homicide victims from 1989–90 to 1997–98 ranged

Table 1: AUSTRALIA, 1 July 1989–30 June 1998: Distribution of Homicide Victims According to Gender of Offenders (n = 2704)*

Victim	Male Offender		Female Offender		Total Offenders	
	No. Victims	%	No. Victims	%	No. Victims	%
Male	1464	54.2	237	8.8	1701	62.9
Female	931	34.4	72	2.6	1003	37.1
Total	2395	88.6	309	11.4	2704	100.0

*Excludes 125 unidentified offenders, and 222 cases where either victim's or offender's gender was unknown/not stated.

Source: National Homicide Monitoring Program, AIC

Figure 1: AUSTRALIA, 1 July 1989 – 30 June 1998: Female Homicide Victimization Rate per 100,000 Age-specific Population



Source: National Homicide Monitoring Program, AIC

from 147 in 1990–91 to 111 in 1996–97. On average, 125 females are murdered each year in Australia.

Age

Homicide victimisation varies significantly according to age because of different levels of exposure to violence during one's life cycle (James & Carcach 1998). Figure 1 shows the rate of homicide victimisation for females per 100,000 population for each specific age.

Females are at a relatively high risk of homicide victimisation during early infancy, that is less than one year old (rate of 2.7 per 100 000 population), and from late teens (rate of 2.3) to early thirties (average rate of 2.1, 18–31 years). The highest risk of homicide victimisation for females (rate of 2.8 per 100 000 population) is between the ages of 21 and 23 years. Age-specific vulnerability for males differs slightly from females. For example, the highest risk of homicide victimisation for males is between the ages of 24 and 26 years (Mouzou 1999).

The Context of Femicide

The nature of the relationship between victim and offender determines the context and dynamics of femicide. It is therefore essential to examine the contexts in which a woman is killed based on the relational distance between victim and offender. This study has focused on four victim-offender relationships: intimates; family; friends/acquaintances; and strangers.

Of the 1125 female homicide victims identified over the 9-year period, 875 victims became the focus of analysis, excluding:

- 137 victims aged 0–14 years; and
- 113 victims associated with offenders who were “unknown/not stated”, or in relationships that were unidentified or other than the four specified.

Relational contexts

Male offenders were responsible for killing approximately 94 per cent of adult female victims, and

the vast majority (61%) of these killings occurred in an intimate relational context. Only 14.6 per cent (128) of adult female victims were killed in a stranger relational context. However, when women kill women, the relationship is more likely to be friends (or acquaintances), or within the family.

There also appear to be distinct differences in the victim-offender relationship between male and female homicide victimisation. For example, almost 60 per cent of women were killed by an intimate partner (Figure 2), but men are more likely to be killed by a friend or acquaintance (45%) or by a stranger (32%), and in approximately 95 per cent of these non-intimate homicides the offender is also male. In comparison to women, only 11 per cent of men were killed by an intimate partner, with the majority (84%) of these offenders being female.

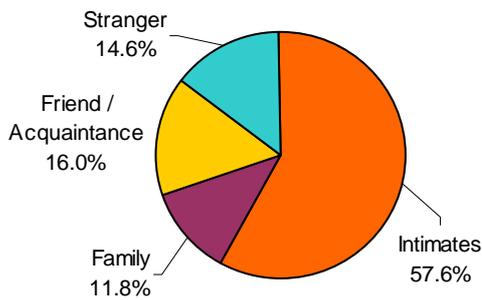
These findings indicate that the killing of women in Australia is overwhelmingly a male-dominated act, where more often than not there is some familiarity between the victim and offender.

Spatial context & motives of femicide

In an intimate context, approximately 90 per cent of femicide victims were killed as a result of “altercations of a domestic nature”, referring to general domestic arguments, desertion or termination of an intimate relationship, and jealousy and/or rivalry. Domestic altercations involving desertion, termination of a relationship or jealousy were found to provide the motives for the deaths of approximately 40 per cent of the femicide victims.

When victims of femicide in an intimate relational context are killed as a result of a domestic altercation, most (77%) are killed in some private residence—either at their home or at the offender's home. Less than a quarter (22.6%) are killed at some other location, such as a street/open area, commercial location or public transport/transport connected facility. (All but three of these cases involved a male offender.)

Figure 2: AUSTRALIA, 1 July 1989–30 June 1998: Adult Female Homicide Victims, Relationship to Offender



Source: National Homicide Monitoring Program, AIC

In contrast, when men kill women who are strangers, nearly three-quarters of the victims are killed at some location other than a private residence. It has been suggested that, contrary to popular beliefs, homicides that occur between strangers may also involve an element of social interaction, and such an incident, as with other types of homicides, does not occur in a vacuum (Silverman & Kennedy 1993; Polk 1994). This is consistent with the present study, where more than half (57%) of the femicide victims killed in a stranger relational context died in the course of other crime, including robberies, sexual assault, abduction and break-ins.

Weapons of femicide

The type of weapon used to kill the victim varied according to the

relational context. In an intimate relational context, a male offender is more likely to use a knife or some other sharp instrument to kill a woman. On the other hand, when male strangers commit femicide they are more likely to use bodily force (assault with hands and/or feet). A knife or other sharp instrument is likely to be used by both male and female offenders against family or friends.

Similarly, the study found that both men and women were most likely to be killed with a knife or other sharp instrument (see Table 2) and, overall, there appeared to be no significant difference between the percentage of male and female victims for any single type of weapon. In other words, it would not be possible to predict the gender of the victim based on the type of weapon used to commit the homicide.

Factors Associated with the Occurrence of Femicide

As we have shown, women are at a relatively low risk of victimisation. In those rare instances where femicide does occur, there are a number of factors that are associated with an elevated risk, including the location of the killing, the motive and the relational context. The likelihood of femicide will vary in accordance with these factors, and with the degree to which these factors are related to the socio-demographic characteristics of the femicide victims and their offenders.

Table 2: AUSTRALIA, 1 July 1989–30 June 1998: Homicide, Type of Weapon Used According to Gender of Victim (n = 2838)*

Weapon	Female Victims	Male Victims
Knife**	33.1%	38.2%
Hands, Feet	27.8%	24.7%
Firearm	22.8%	22.9%
Blunt Instrument	11.8%	11.4%
Other***	4.3%	2.9%
Total	100.0 %	100.0 %

* Excludes 207 cases where either victim's gender or type of weapon was unknown or not stated

** Includes other sharp instruments

*** Includes poison, fire, drugs & other undetermined methods

Source: National Homicide Monitoring Program, AIC

Age

As previously mentioned, age is associated with mortality risk, just as the genders of victim and offender shape the context within which a killing occurs. Table 3 outlines the mean age of victims and offenders based on the victim-offender relationship. The most striking finding is that the offender's age varies according to the relational distance between the victim and offender—as the offender's mean age decreases, so does the level of familiarity between the victim and offender. Offenders tend to be older than their victims in those femicides where the bond between the victim and offender is strongest, namely those relationships between intimates and family. However, when the bond between the adult female victim and offender may be weaker, offenders tend to be younger than their victims (Smith & Stanko unpub.).

Racial appearance

Racial appearance and victim-offender relationship are also associated with differential homicide mortality. The proportion of Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander (TSI) femicide victims that were killed by an intimate partner (75.4%) was higher than both Caucasian (54.2%) and Asian (51%) femicide victims that were killed by an intimate partner. As noted in Figure 2, just under 58 per cent of all femicide victims were killed in an intimate relational context.

Only 1.5 per cent of Aboriginal/TSI victims were killed by a stranger, whereas 17.2 per cent of

Table 3: AUSTRALIA, 1 July 1989–30 June 1998: Mean Age of Femicide Victims and Offenders According to Relational Context

Relational Context	Mean Age of Victims	Mean Age of Offenders
<i>Intimates</i>	36 years old	39 years old
<i>Family</i>	50 years old	32 years old
<i>Friends / Acquaintances</i>	36 years old	31 years old
<i>Strangers</i>	41 years old	28 years old

Source: National Homicide Monitoring Program, AIC

Caucasian victims and 16.3 per cent of Asian victims were killed by a stranger. This difference may be explained in terms of the structure of Aboriginal/TSI communities, where more often than not Aboriginal/TSI people live amongst immediate family and relatives in a close-knit community where there is a high degree of familiarity. A stranger (who is most likely to be a displaced Aboriginal from some other area) who enters such a community is more likely to be noticed than in any other setting and therefore have fewer opportunities to commit homicide.

Further differences in the homicide of males are associated with racial appearance and relational context. When Aboriginal/TSI men and Caucasian men were killed, they were most likely to be killed by a friend or acquaintance. However, Aboriginal/TSI men were twice as likely (21.7%) as Caucasian men (10.2%) to be killed by an intimate partner. Overall, these findings indicate that a higher proportion of Aboriginal/TSI men and women than Caucasian men and women were killed by an intimate partner.

Femicides in Australia generally occur between victims and offenders who have the same racial appearance, with only 5 per cent being of an inter-racial nature. Furthermore, the inter-racial femicides are most likely to occur between strangers. In contrast, approximately 10 per cent of homicides involving male victims were of an inter-racial nature and, similar to the femicides, these were most likely to occur between strangers.

Moreover, the place of occurrence tended to vary with the racial appearance of both the victim and offender. When Caucasian and Asian women are killed, they are most likely to be killed at some private residence. In contrast, when Aboriginal/TSI women are killed, they are most likely to be killed in a location other than a private residence.

Although similar in some ways to homicide between Cau-

casian people, homicide between Aboriginal/TSI people exhibits these unique characteristics:

- a higher proportion of both men and women are killed by an intimate partner;
- women are highly unlikely to be killed by a stranger; and
- women are more likely to be killed in a location other than a private residence.

In addition to these, one of the most significant differences is the over-representation of Aboriginal/TSI people as both victims and offenders of femicide. In 16 per cent of femicide cases, both the victim and offender were of Aboriginal/TSI appearance. Overall, Aboriginal/TSI women accounted for approximately 15 per cent of the femicide victims, although comprising only about 2 per cent of the total female Australian population (ABS 1996). On the other hand, Aboriginal/TSI men (aged 15 and over) account for approximately 12.3 per cent of all male homicide victims.

Marital & employment status

A number of researchers have addressed the relationship between marital status and homicide victimisation. Some argue that, for men, marriage is a form of social control that keeps them from engaging in the risky behaviour that attends homicide victimisation—frequenting the bar scene, heavy drinking, staying out late, fighting, etc. (Breault & Kposowa 1997). On the other hand, it has been found that, for women, marriage is more of a homicide risk than non-marriage (Gartner & McCarthy 1991). Therefore, these studies suggest that any advantage marriage might otherwise have for women is offset by the homicide risk they face from their spouses. For example, Kposowa and Singh (1994) found that married women in the United States were twice as likely to be victims of homicide as were married men.

The routine activities theory suggests that socio-demographic

characteristics that are associated with individuals spending more time at home should also be associated with disproportionately high levels of homicide at or near the home, in comparison with other locations (Messner & Tardiff 1985). This theory further suggests that socio-demographic characteristics such as gender (female), employment status (not working) and marital status (married) are also associated with higher risks of homicide victimisation at or in the home (Messner & Tardiff 1985; Carcach & James 1998).

Our analysis shows that an increased likelihood of femicide victimisation was associated with four significant factors:

- (1) female victim not working;
- (2) male offender not working;
- (3) victim and offender are involved in an intimate relationship; and
- (4) incident occurred in a private residence.

On the other hand, the lowest likelihood of femicide victimisation, at least amongst intimates or family, is associated with the victim being employed. These findings indicate that women's access to employment opportunities and economic independence reduces the amount of time that they would spend in or near the home, and it also reduces exposure to violence from an intimate partner. In addition, a woman's improved economic status may further reduce her exposure to violence, as the financial barriers associated with exiting a violent relationship may be lessened (Dugan, Nagin & Rosenfeld 1997).

Alcohol use

Alcohol appears not to be a major factor associated with the occurrence of femicide. It did appear, however, that when both the victim and offender were under the influence of alcohol, the femicide was most likely to occur in some other location than in a private residence.

Racial appearance & alcohol use

A separate analysis included the racial appearance of the victim and offender and whether they had been under the influence of alcohol at the time of the incident. In nearly three-quarters of the femicides (where information was available) that occurred between Aboriginal/TSI people, both the victim and offender were under the influence of alcohol. In contrast, only 12 per cent of victims and offenders of Caucasian appearance were both under the influence of alcohol at the time of the incident.

In addition, 75 per cent of victims and offenders who were of Caucasian appearance were not under the influence of alcohol, whereas only 19 per cent of victims and offenders of Aboriginal/TSI appearance were not under the influence of alcohol at the time of the incident.

These findings indicate that there is a relatively high level of alcohol involvement in femicides that occur between Aboriginal/TSI people. However, patterns of alcohol consumption cannot be considered without reference to cultural considerations. According to the work of many researchers, Aboriginal drinking has been widely assimilated into basic cultural notions such as those of sharing and reciprocity (Brady & Palmer 1984). Nonetheless, it would be overly simplistic to attribute the excessive alcohol consumption found in the present study merely to differences in cultural background. Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that any treatment or intervention measures put forth must take into consideration that the treatment needs for Aboriginal problem drinkers are different to those for non-Aborigines (Douglas 1993).

Table 4: AUSTRALIA, 1 July 1989–30 June 1998: Comparison of Relevant Characteristics Between Male and Female Homicide Victims Aged 15 and Over

Characteristics	Femicide Victims (n=875)	Male Victims (n=1574)
Incident Characteristics		
Incident occurred at Private Residence	*69.8%	54.7%
Incident occurred at Other Location	*30.2%	45.3%
Alleged motive of incident		
Jealousy/Desertion	*29.4%	7.1%
Domestic Altercation	*43.7%	13.7%
Money/Drugs	*7.3%	15.2%
Revenge	*2.6%	11.7%
Alcohol-related Argument	*5.0%	24.1%
Other	*3.2%	19.4%
No Apparent Motive	8.8%	8.8%
Most common weapon used to kill victim		
Knife and other sharp instrument	33.1%	38.2%
Victim – Offender Characteristics		
Age		
Mean Age of Victim	38 years	37 years
Mean Age of Offender	35 years	29 years
Median Age of Victim	35 years	34 years
Median Age of Offender	32 years	27 years
Victim Younger than Offender	*52.5%	31.0%
Victim Same Age as Offender	7.4%	5.8%
Victim Older than Offender	*40.1%	63.2%
Gender of offender		
Male Offender	*93.8%	85.8%
Female Offender	*6.2%	14.2%
Racial appearance		
Victim & Offender Caucasian	75.3%	74.3%
Victim & Offender Aboriginal/TSI	*15.5%	11.7%
Victim & Offender of Different Race	*5.1%	9.6%
Employment status		
Victim/Offender Working	10.9%	10.2%
Victim Working/Offender Not Working	*10.3%	22.6%
Victim Not Working/Offender Working	*16.5%	8.2%
Victim/Offender Not Working	62.4%	59.0%
Alcohol consumption		
Both Victim & Offender Drinking	*20.7%	39.1%
Victim Drinking But Not Offender	*2.5%	6.0%
Offender Drinking But Not Victim	10.5%	8.3%
Neither Victim/Offender Drinking	*66.3%	46.4%
Victim – Offender Relationship		
Intimates	*57.6%	11.1%
Family	11.8%	12.3%
Friends/Acquaintances	*16.0%	44.9%
Strangers	*14.6%	31.8%

*p<0.05.

Comparing Men and Women as Victims of Homicide

Data in Table 4 provide a comparison between male and female homicide victims on characteris-

tics associated with the incident, victim and offender, and the relationship between the victim and offender. It is quite obvious

that there are a number of noticeable differences between the killing of women and the killing of men.

Differences

The main differences between the killing of a woman and the killing of a man are:

- A woman is more likely than a man to be killed at home.
- A woman is more likely to be killed as a result of a domestic altercation, whereas a man is more likely to be killed as a result of an alcohol-related argument.
- The female victim is more likely to be younger than the offender, whereas a male victim is more likely to be older than the offender.
- Female victims are less likely than male victims to be killed by females.
- Homicides involving female victims are less likely than homicides involving male victims to be of an inter-racial nature.
- Homicides involving female victims are less likely than homicides involving male victims to involve alcohol.
- A female is more likely to be killed by an intimate partner, whereas a male is more likely to be killed by a friend or acquaintance.

Similarities

There are also some similarities between the killing of a woman and the killing of a man:

- Men and women are equally likely to be killed with a knife or some other sharp instrument.
- A similar percentage of men and women victims are the same age as their offenders.
- The distribution of employment status (victim and offender) did not differ between male and female homicide victims.
- The distribution of alcohol involvement (victim not drinking/offender drinking) did not differ between male and female homicide victims.

- A similar proportion of male and female homicide victims (approximately 12%) are killed by a family member.

Conclusion

When women are killed intentionally by another, they are more likely than not to die at the hand of an intimate partner. It follows that factors that are associated with a woman spending more time at home—that is, not working—are also associated with an increased likelihood of victimisation. Not surprisingly, when a woman is killed, she is most likely to be killed in the privacy of her own home.

Our findings raise a number of policy implications:

- the need for women who are not working to have better access to resources and services that protect women and that would allow them to protect themselves;
- the availability of subsidised counselling for couples who are both not working;
- comprehensive programs that involve Aboriginal/TSI people as a community in managing and responding to alcohol and violence problems;
- increased participation by women in the labour force, which may be expected to reduce their vulnerability to intimate homicide.

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Jenny Mouzos is a Research Analyst at the Australian Institute of Criminology.



General Editor, Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice series:
Dr Adam Graycar, Director
Australian Institute of Criminology
GPO Box 2944
Canberra ACT 2601 Australia

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