

## ***Fire-associated homicides in Australia***

The AIC has recently undertaken research investigating the use of fire in homicides in Australia. The National Homicide Monitoring Program database, containing data on all homicides known to police in Australia between 1989–90 and 2004–05, was used to identify the 100 homicide incidents where fire was responsible for the death, or the death was recorded as occurring in association with the arson. The incidents comprised 149 victims and 105 offenders, and were categorised according to whether fire was used as a weapon (68% of incidents) or was a secondary event to the homicide (29% of incidents; the remaining three percent could not be categorised).

In those incidents where fire was used as a weapon, most (74%) involved a single victim and offender, and most often occurred in a residential setting (69%), although rarely in a street or open area (3%). Females comprised 60 percent of the victims, with a mean age of 37 years. Most of the offenders (83%) were males, with an average age of 32 years. The most common relationship between the victim and the offender was classified as strangers (25%), followed by friend/acquaintance (22%). For the 13 incidents where a motive was recorded, one-third were classified as revenge, and one-third as domestic arguments.

The incidents in which fire was secondary to the homicide also primarily involved a single victim and offender (54%). The victim in 60 percent of these homicides was male, with an average age of 33 years. The most common cause of death was gunshot wounds (35%), followed by stabbing (19%) and beating (19%). Males were responsible for most of the homicides (84%) and the average age of offenders was 33 years. The most common motive recorded was a domestic argument (41%), and 40 percent involved intimate partners, which was the most common relationship.

One of the primary reasons that fire is used secondary to a homicide is to destroy evidence. The research found that, contrary to expectations, fire-associated homicides were no more likely to remain unsolved than other forms of homicide, but those that used fire as a weapon were less likely to be solved than those where fire was secondary to the homicide. This suggests that either fire is not a very effective way to destroy evidence, or that the additional investigative resources, such as the involvement of fire agency investigators, assist in the clearance of these crimes.

There has been an increase in fire-associated homicides over the time the National Homicide Monitoring Program has been in effect. Although the overall numbers of fire-associated homicides remain low (an average of six incidents a year), these homicides remain a challenge for police and fire agencies. This research provides some important insights into this crime and adds to the body of knowledge regarding arson-related homicides both in Australia and internationally.

### ***References***

Davies M & Mouzos J 2007. Fatal fires: fire associated homicide in Australia, 1990–2005. *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* no. 340. <http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi2/tandi340.html>