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Homicide Between Friends and Acquaintances in Australia

Jenny Mouzos

Twenty-eight per cent of homicides are among friends and acquaintances. This is less than among intimates and family combined, but is nevertheless significant in that it involves over a quarter of all homicides. In other countries, for example, the United States, Greece and Canada, friends and acquaintances account for almost half of all homicides.

The most significant factors relating to homicides among friends and acquaintances is that there is a single victim and a single offender, that the offender is nearly always male and that the victim is also mostly male. Most take place within a residential location with alcohol being present, and often both victim and offender have been drinking. The preferred weapon is a knife or other sharp implement.

Friends and acquaintances is a very broad category. This paper disaggregates the categories and suggests that policy work ought to be focused separately.

Adam Graycar
Director

Following Wolfgang's (1958) seminal work, it has been recognised in Australia and elsewhere that the relationships among the key actors in a homicide are of utmost importance in understanding the event (Polk 1994). To quote Wolfgang (1958, p. 203):

criminal homicide is probably the most personalized crime in our society. Because motives do not exist in a vacuum, the subject-object, doer-sufferer relationship is of prime importance in this particular crime.

Very little Australian and international literature has focused on homicides between friends and acquaintances. It seems that most research has focused on intimate-partner homicide or homicide within the family, or on stranger-perpetrated homicide. Considering that in Australia the most common victim-offender relationship outside of intimates and other family is that of friends and acquaintances (Mouzos 2000), it is surprising that little research has been devoted to the study of this type of victim-offender interaction.

This neglect may perhaps be explained by the fact that homicide between friends and acquaintances involves diverse relationships:

Friends and acquaintances represent degrees of intimacy, ranging from feelings of closeness that rival any family intimacy, to distance that borders on passing acquaintance. They represent the homicides occurring in and around bar-rooms and other public venues that make the morning press but attract little attention because of their distance from mainstream lifestyles. (Silverman & Kennedy 1993, p. 90)

This study addresses this gap in the homicide literature by examining circumstances and characteristics of homicides involving friends and acquaintances in Australia. Most importantly, however, it will attempt to determine whether the category of "friends" and "acquaintances" is indeed a homogenous group.

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Definition of Terms

It has been suggested that “one of the most important and difficult distinctions to make is the distinction between friends and acquaintances” (Loftin et al. 1987, p. 266). However any distinctions made should be based on the intensity of the relationship (commonsense distinction between “close friends” and “casual friends”), and the functional basis of the relationship (reason for the interaction and the mechanisms that maintain social structure) (Loftin et al. 1987, p. 266). Intensity of the relationship is determined by the relative frequency of the interaction, whereas a relationship grounded in “functionality” is indicative of persons whose relationships are based on circumstances alone, referred to as “associates” (Loftin et al. 1987) or more commonly known as “acquaintances”.

Others have suggested that the distinction between friends and acquaintances should be made on the basis that the acquaintance category is closest to that of strangers.

Many acquaintances themselves may have misjudged the nature of the relationship between themselves and the assailant: victims may perceive a degree of insularity in the relationship, a perception not shared by the suspect. Such non-reciprocal relationships may be found most often in the friend or acquaintance category. (Decker 1993, p. 593)

For the purposes of the present study the category “friends and acquaintances” will encompass the following:

- close friend;
- acquaintance—neighbour; and
- acquaintance.

A “close friend” refers to one with whom frequent, direct and personal contacts were consistently maintained until the time of the homicide incident. An “acquaintance” generally implies more than recognition, but less than fellowship or friendship. “It refers to direct contact as a result of personal knowledge, but devoid of intimacy or frequency” (Wolfgang 1958, p. 205). Included in this category is “neighbour”,

Table 1: International comparison—homicides between friends and acquaintances

Country and study year(s)	Total homicides*	Friend and acquaintance** homicide (%)
United States (1998)	8,695	4,311 (49.6)
Canada (1998)	431	181 (42.0)
New Zealand (1998)	51	9 (17.7)
England and Wales (1998–99)*	608	214 (35.2)
Fiji (1982–1992)	265	63 (23.8)
Greece (1985–88)**	185	86 (46.5)
Denmark (1946–1970)	892	180 (21.0)
Iceland (1900–1979)	49	21 (43.0)
Northern Sweden (1970–1981)	71	28 (39.0)
Hong Kong (1989–1997)	532	118 (22.2)

* where victim–offender relationship is known ** includes “neighbour”
 # 1 April 1998 to 31 March 1999 ## 1 August 1985 to 31 July 1988
 Source: Gudjonsson and Petursson (1990); Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (1999); US Department of Justice (1999); Central Investigation Bureau Support Group (1999); Home Office (1999); Adinkrah (1996); Chimbos (1993); Broadhurst (1999).

which may be considered an overlapping category between that of close friend and acquaintance, depending on the individual circumstances of each relationship.

exist. However, careful matching and collapsing of some categories may, in some cases, allow for meaningful comparisons between countries and also between studies (Loftin et al. 1987).

International Review

A review of the international literature and official crime statistics reveals that for the offence of homicide, only a handful of countries actually provide figures or proportions differentiated by the victim–offender relationship (this of course excludes numerous other studies that have only examined particular states or cities).

Based on available information, it appears that the distribution of homicides between friends and acquaintances varies between countries (Table 1). The proportion of homicides involving friends and acquaintances ranges from as low as about 18 per cent in New Zealand in 1998 (Central Investigation Bureau Support Group 1999) to as high as 50 per cent in the United States in 1998 (US Department of Justice 1999). In the other countries examined, the proportion of homicides between friends and acquaintances is between 35 and 45 per cent (Table 1).

Although, this international comparison was for illustrative purposes only, it is also important to recognise that methodological differences between classification schemes do

The Australian Experience

The Data Set

This study will analyse data held as part of the National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP) at the Australian Institute of Criminology. Established in 1990, the NHMP routinely collects data on all homicides coming to the attention of police services throughout Australia.

Between 1 July 1989 and 30 June 1999—the period of this study—a total of 3,150 homicide incidents occurred, perpetrated by 3,481 identified offenders and resulting in the death of 3,386 victims. It should be noted that some homicide incidents involve more than one victim and/or offender. For the present study, we are only interested in those cases where there was a known offender and the relationship between the victim and the offender was classified as being either “friends” or “acquaintances”. (Determination and classification of the relationship between the homicide victim and offender is made primarily by investigating police, and is usually recorded in offence reports. This information is the basis for which the victim–offender relationship is classified in the NHMP database.) In the

case of multiple offender and/or victims, only the principal offender and/or victim was counted. In all, the sample comprised 1,017 cases.

Frequency of Involvement

Homicides between friends and acquaintances (outside of intimates and other family) occur more frequently than any other type of homicide in Australia. During the 10-year period, approximately 28 per cent of all homicides (where an offender had been identified and arrested) occurred between friends and acquaintances (see Table 5, Mouzos 2000, p. 68). In all States except Tasmania and Western Australia, when a homicide occurs it is most likely to occur between friends and acquaintances (Mouzos 2000, p. 67).

In the United States and Canada, acquaintances account for the majority of homicides in the friends and acquaintance category (90.3% and 80.3% respectively) (US Department of Justice 1999; Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics 1999). In Australia, acquaintances account for about 70 per cent and friends account for 27.2 per cent, whereas neighbours only account for 2.4 per cent in terms of the distribution of homicides in the “friends and acquaintances” category.

Comparative Analyses: Are Friend and Acquaintance Homicides Different or the Same?

The following discussion will focus on the various circumstances involved when friends and acquaintances kill, and whether homicides among “friends” differ from homicides among “acquaintances”. Table 2 summaries some of the similarities and differences of these homicides.

Gender Relations

Homicide is predominantly a masculine phenomenon (Polk 1994; Silverman & Kennedy 1993; Mouzos 1999, 2000). Research also suggests that the further the relational distance between the victim and the offender, the more likely that the homicide will involve male-on-male interactions

(Silverman & Kennedy 1993).

Overall, about 80 per cent of homicides between friends and acquaintances in Australia occurred between a male victim and a male offender. Only about 18 per cent of these homicides involved an interaction between persons of different sexes, that is, a male killing a female (13.4%), or a female killing a male (4.6%).

In terms of the gender of the offender, as expected males featured predominantly as the perpetrators (92.0%), with only about eight per cent of females responsible for these homicides. Although differences did not yield any statistically significant results (see Table 2), an observation worth noting is that as the relational distance decreased, female offenders accounted for a greater proportion of homicides. For example, females were responsible for 9.4 per cent of homicides involving friends and 7.5 per cent of homicides involving acquaintances.

This pattern is consistent when the gender of victims is examined. Again, males were more likely to be victims than females (83.3%); however, more female victims were killed by a friend (18.8%) than by an acquaintance (15.9%). These observations seem to reconfirm the notion that the greater the relational distance between the victim and the offender, the more likely that the homicide will involve a male victim and a male offender, and less likely it will involve females.

Age of Actors in the Homicide Drama

In terms of the age of the participants in the homicide drama, “many studies confirm the notion that murder is a young person’s act” (Silverman & Kennedy 1987, p. 278). In Australia, and elsewhere for that matter, the rate of both homicide victimisation and offending seems to peak around about the mid-twenties (Mouzos 2000). Other research has also found that offenders, on average, tend to be slightly younger than their victims (Wolfgang 1958; Silverman & Kennedy 1987).

An analysis of homicides between friends and

acquaintances indicates that the victims tended to be older than their attackers (Table 2). This pattern was consistent for both friend and acquaintance homicides.

A frequency count according to the age group of both victims and offenders reveals a common finding; the largest proportion of victims and offenders fell into the 25 to 34 year age group (31.6% for victims; 34.5% for offenders). There appeared to be no age group differences in those homicides involving friends in comparison to acquaintance homicides.

Intra-Racial Versus Inter-Racial

Homicide is usually an intra-racial phenomenon. That is, the majority of homicides occur between persons who are of the same racial appearance, usually Caucasian (James & Carcach 1997; Mouzos 2000). (As stated in previous publications based on the NHMP dataset, the categories used to differentiate racial appearance are Caucasian, Indigenous, Asian and Other; see Mouzos 2000, p. 34, for a cautionary note on racial appearance.) In the present study, when the distribution of friend and acquaintance homicides according to the racial appearance of both the victim and the offender was examined, the results indicated that the overwhelming majority of these homicides were of an intra-racial nature. In other words, friend and acquaintance homicides occurred predominantly between persons of the same racial appearance, usually between non-Indigenous persons (81.9% and 86.5% respectively) (Table 2).

When both the victim and the offender were Indigenous, a statistically significant greater proportion of homicides occurred among friends (13.4%) than among acquaintances (8.7%) (see Table 2). Less than one per cent of homicides among friends occurred between a non-Indigenous offender and an Indigenous victim (0.4%).

Single Versus Multiple Victimisation and Offending

Eight out of 10 homicides are characterised as one-on-one

interactions between the victim and the offender (Mouzos 2000, p. 24). Based on the relational distance, one would assume that intimate homicides would most likely be the type of lethal interaction to involve a single victim and offender. (This excludes murder-suicides that occur within a family, where multiple victims are not uncommon.) At the other end of the scale, acquaintance and stranger homicides may be more likely to involve multiple victims and/or offenders. Take, for example, the Port Arthur massacre where one offender killed 35 victims, 33 of whom were not known to the offender (Mouzos 2000).

Analyses of homicides based on single versus multiple victimisation and offending

reveals that homicides among friends involved a statistically significant greater proportion of one-on-one interactions (72.6%) than did homicides among acquaintances (50.7%) (Table 2). Also, more than twice as many acquaintance homicides involved a single victim killed by multiple offenders (42.3%), in comparison to homicides among friends (20.2%). Only 14 homicides that occurred between acquaintances involved multiple victim-offender interactions (2.0%). No multiple victim-offender homicides were recorded as having occurred between friends (Table 2).

Location of the Incident

Homicide most commonly occurs in a residential premise (Mouzos

2000). This also appears to be the case when friends and acquaintances are killed. During the 10-year period under review about 61 per cent of friend and acquaintance homicides took place in a residential premise (n=620). Of the homicides that took place in some other location (39.0%, n=397), the majority of those occurred in a street or open area (60.2%, n=239).

When friend and acquaintance homicides were examined separately, a noteworthy pattern emerged (Table 2). Again related to the relational distance, it appears that a smaller proportion of homicides between friends occurred in a location other than a residential premise than those homicides that occurred between acquaintances (Table 2). Put another way, as the relational distance increased, the homicide was more likely to occur in a location other than the victim's or the offender's home.

Motive for the Killing

Apart from the victim-offender relationship, the motive for the killing is considered a relatively important aspect in homicide research. Knowing why a person kills another gives us insight into the context of the homicide. It is widely accepted that the reason behind a killing will vary according to the relationship that the offender has with the victim.

Consistent with findings of other research, in the present study most victims who had some type of friendship or were acquainted with their attacker died primarily as a result of some type of altercation or dispute (59%, n=600) (Figure 6). This dispute or altercation was either precipitated by alcohol (22.1%, n=225), or over money (bad debts) or drugs (supply and demand) (16.6%, n=169), or a result of some other type of argument (20.3%, n=206). The argument often, as Polk (1994) pointed out, appears trivial to outsiders.

However, a number of differences have emerged concerning the reasons associated with the homicide of a friend in comparison to the killing of an

Table 2: Australia, 1 July 1989 to 30 June 1999—comparison between friend and acquaintance homicides#

Circumstances and characteristics	Percentage	
	Friends (n=277)	Acquaintances (n=716)
<i>Gender</i>		
Male victim	81.2	84.1
Female victim	18.8	15.9
Male offender	90.6	92.5
Female offender	9.4	7.5
Male-on-male	75.8	79.6
Male-on-female	14.8	12.9
<i>Age</i>		
Victim younger than offender	43.0	37.9
Victim same age as offender	8.3	6.8
Victim older than offender	48.7	55.3
<i>Racial appearance</i>		
Non-Indigenous on non-Indigenous	81.9	86.5
Indigenous on Indigenous	*13.4	8.7
<i>Single v. multiple victimisation offending</i>		
Single victim—single offender	**72.6	50.7
Single victim—multiple offenders	**20.2	42.3
Multiple victims—single offender	7.2	5.0
Multiple victims—multiple offenders	0.0	2.0
<i>Location of incident</i>		
Residential premise	**69.0	58.0
Other location	**31.1	42.0
<i>Motive of the killing</i>		
Alcohol-related argument	**33.6	17.9
Other argument	**31.4	56.7
<i>Type of weapon used</i>		
Knife and other sharp instrument	36.9	35.1
Hands or feet	29.0	23.9
Blunt instrument	**10.3	16.2
Firearm	18.7	21.7
<i>Alcohol involvement</i>		
Both victim and offender drinking	**53.8	35.9
Neither victim and offender drinking	**38.6	48.3
<i>Alcohol and location</i>		
Both drinking and residential location	**39.4	19.3
Both drinking and other location	14.4	16.6
<i>Alcohol and weapon choice</i>		
Both drinking and knife used	**20.6	13.7
Neither drinking and knife used	*10.5	15.4
Neither drinking and firearm used	*7.2	12.6

excludes 24 cases that occurred between neighbours

*p<.05 **p<.01

acquaintance (Table 2). Proportionately, alcohol-related arguments appear to be the context in which more friends (33.6%) have met their death than have acquaintances (17.9%) (Table 2).

Given that friends may be more likely to engage in social drinking together, we would expect greater opportunities for “misunderstandings” or trivial altercations to arise. Affected by alcohol, and with increased aggressiveness among the men (Boyatzis 1974), trivial matters can and do escalate relatively quickly, in some cases resulting in death.

Some homicides, such as those termed by Polk and Ranson (1989) as “slow disintegration” or “sudden flare-ups” are a result of friends “reaching out for violence, in this case lethal violence, as a way to solve disputes occurring within the bonds of what had been a friendship” (Polk & Ranson 1989, p. 33).

Homicides referred to as “resolution on the margins” occur between a victim and an offender who have been friends, but the friendship disintegrates because of issues such as bad debts between the parties, usually drug-related. With no alternative means of dispute settlement (such as legitimate avenues) and no other source of status, these “arguments simply continue to escalate to the point where lethal violence results” (Polk & Ranson 1989, p. 31).

They are killing to honour not only values often associated with the lower classes (male virility and *machismo*), but values typically labelled as middle class or bourgeois: the sanctity of the marital union, respect for property rights and the importance of being a responsible debtor. (Katz 1988, p. 45)

In the present study, about one in 10 lethal disputes among friends were money- or drug-related (n=24).

By contrast, the reasons or motives associated with acquaintance homicides are more diverse. Arguments over money or drugs, or some other trivial altercation, sometimes precipitated by alcohol, seem to

play a greater role in the homicide. About 16 per cent of the acquaintance homicides are characterised as “revenge killings” (n=115). These are homicides where the offender(s) seeks out his acquaintance in order to enact revenge for some alleged wrongdoing.

Type of Weapon Used

In Australia, the most common weapon used to commit homicide is a knife or other sharp instrument (Mouzos 1999, 2000). This pattern appears, as well, with homicides involving friends and acquaintances (Table 2). Hands and feet were the second most common weapon used in these homicides, followed by a firearm. A significantly greater proportion of acquaintances were fatally assaulted with a blunt instrument (16.2%) than were friends (10.3%).

Alcohol Involvement

An examination of the degree of alcohol involvement, excluding the situational context, indicates that just over half of friend and acquaintance homicides involved either the victim or the offender or both being under the influence of alcohol at the time of the incident (53.9%, n=548). Homicides where both the victim and the offender had been drinking were significantly more likely to have occurred between friends (53.8%) than acquaintances (39.9%) (see Table 2).

It has been suggested that alcohol can have a disinhibiting effect on aggressive behaviour (Pernanen 1981, 1991; Parker & Rebhun 1995; Foote 1999).

In addition to overcoming social constraints and norms, alcohol is also said to have a negative effect on judgment, information processing, and perception (Taylor & Leonard 1983; Pihl, Peterson & Lau 1993). Bearing in mind the possible effects that alcohol consumption may have on an individual, it was decided to explore further whether there are any differences in homicides between friends and acquaintances who had been drinking, in comparison to those who had not. The contextual characteristics of location and the type of weapon chosen by the offender in relation to alcohol

involvement were analysed further.

A number of significant differences were found. When both the victim and offender were drinking, a significantly greater proportion of homicides among friends than among acquaintances occurred in a residential premise (39.4% and 19.3% respectively [Table 2]). These findings concur with other research that has found that alcohol involvement in aggressive incidents was highest in drinking establishments, hotels and other people’s homes, when assailants and victims were male (Pernanen 1991; Graham, Schmidt & Gillis 1996).

In relation to weapon use and alcohol involvement, regardless of who was or was not drinking, a knife was the most common weapon used to kill. However, a greater proportion of homicides among friends who had been drinking involved the use of a knife. Acquaintances who had not been drinking were significantly more likely to use a firearm, in comparison to friends in a similar situation (Table 2).

It seems that alcohol may play a role, albeit in some cases a relatively minor role, in the homicide drama.

The effects of alcohol vary from person to person and across situations. Unfortunately, in the present study the amount of alcohol consumed by the victim and the offender was not measured. It is therefore not possible to determine whether similar findings would have been obtained if the homicides were divided into victims and offenders who had consumed a few drinks and those who had drunk heavily prior to the incident.

Discussion: Directions for Future Research

This study has examined some of the circumstances and characteristics associated with killing one’s friend in comparison to killing one’s acquaintance, both in Australia and internationally. Comparatively, friend and acquaintance homicides constitute a smaller proportion of all homicides in Australia compared to

elsewhere. However, it is possible that some of the differences found could ultimately be a function of differing recording practices and/or classification schemes.

The suggestion made by Silverman and Kennedy (1993) that the friend/acquaintance category is “not a homogenous group” (p. 90) was also explored. The results of this study demonstrate that the category of friends and acquaintances is not a homogenous group.

In sum, homicides among friends were more likely to occur in a residential premise, between two friends who had been drinking and as a result of an argument precipitated by alcohol. In contrast, acquaintance homicides were just as likely to occur in a residential premise as some other location, involve a greater likelihood of multiple offenders in the incident, and occur as a result of an argument, usually over money or drugs or in retaliation for something.

These results seem to confirm the observations of Polk and Ranson (1989) when they indicated that “the current use of the label ‘friends and acquaintances’ needs modification” (p. 53). As we have seen, the dynamics that resulted in lethal violence among friends were quite different to those that resulted in homicide among acquaintances (however, one must concede that although they were statistically significant, the proportions were quite small in some cases).

Nonetheless, given that the category “friends and acquaintances” is not a homogenous group as once thought, Lundsgaarde (1977) suggested that the victim-offender relationship of friends should be examined as a distinct category and not in combination with homicides that occurred between acquaintances.

Following this suggestion, and on the basis of the findings of the current study, it is recommended that the category of “friends and acquaintances” should be examined as two separate types of victim-offender relationships in homicide

research. This should improve our understanding of different victim-offender relationships, and ensure that the distinctive features of the victim-offender relationship of friends are not masked when combined with another category.

Making this distinction may also ensure that the formation of policies aimed at preventing lethal violence will be properly informed, hence providing a sound basis for policy decisions. For example, given the difference in location of incidents for friend and acquaintance homicides, preventative policies would need to make the distinction between private versus public control. Put another way, the same public policy cannot be applied to both the private and public arena. Policy-makers and researchers alike are well aware that it is difficult to develop policy interventions for lethal violence in the private domain, where the amount of external control is very limited (Carcach & James 1998; Mouzos 1999).

For example, legislation prohibiting the carrying of knives in public will have little effect, if any, on the use of knives to commit homicide within a residential premise (Ogilvie 2000).

Knowing the types of confrontations that are most likely to result in lethal violence in a public arena and that their prevention may be more amenable to reduction through public policy initiatives, at least provides policy-makers with direction by guiding their future efforts.

Although a number of fundamental differences were found, the main finding was that these homicides occurred predominantly as a result of dispute-related violence or social control reactions to perceived wrongdoing (Black 1983). “From a deterrence perspective ...acquaintance homicides are less preventable, because human emotions will let loose in uncontrollable outrage” (Rojek & Williams 1993, p. 257). Nonetheless, although “human emotion” cannot be controlled per se, policy can still be directed at “the precursor factors of

aggression...when attempting to minimise the likelihood of homicide” (Ogilvie 2000, p. 37).

One cannot minimise the role of alcohol in the occurrence of lethal violence among friends. It was found that when both the victim and the offender were drinking, the homicide was significantly more likely to occur in a residential premise and the catalyst to the lethal event was a trivial altercation precipitated by the consumption of alcohol. With the disinhibiting effects of alcohol, matters that seem minuscule in importance and relevance can escalate to the point where one is killed.

Like many others, this study confirms that there is reason to question the utility of the common classification system that combines “friends” and “acquaintances” as one category. If our aim as researchers in homicide is to explore the dynamics that occur between the various types of homicide, and to better understand them, then we need to seriously consider that significant differences do exist within categories that are collapsed. A failure to acknowledge this would impede the furthering of our knowledge of lethal violence.

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