



No. 210

# Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Homicides in Australia: A Comparative Analysis

Jenny Mouzos

*This paper examines the similarities and differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous homicides in Australia during an 11-year period. The findings suggest that the "typical" Indigenous homicide in Australia differed from other homicides in important ways.*

*Indigenous homicides were more likely to occur within the family environment, with a high proportion of female involvement (both as victims and offenders). Many of the incidents resulted from some form of domestic altercation. Alcohol was found to play a major role—just over four out of five Indigenous homicides involved either the victim or the offender, or both, drinking at the time of the incident. Knives were the most common weapon of choice, with firearms used in less than six per cent of homicides. Indigenous homicides involving strangers were found to be exceptionally rare.*

*These findings can be used to achieve more informed and sound policy directions in the reduction and prevention of lethal violence for Indigenous Australians.*

**Adam Graycar**  
Director

A recent review of the literature on Indigenous violence indicates that:

...although the statistics are imperfect, they are sufficient to demonstrate the disproportionate occurrence of violence in the Indigenous communities of Australia and the traumatic impact on Indigenous people. (Memmott et al. 2001, p. 6)

While studies on violence in Indigenous communities are now numerous and multifaceted, little research has examined in any great detail the circumstances and characteristics of the most extreme form of violence—homicide. Apart from the reporting of rates of victimisation and offending at either the State or national level (see Martin 1993; James & Carcach 1997; Mouzos 1999, 2000, 2001), there has been no systematic examination of Indigenous homicide despite previous studies suggesting a need for special analysis of this type (James & Carcach 1997).

Comparative research is important in order to identify areas of divergence and convergence with non-Indigenous patterns and trends of homicide in Australia. This paper attempts to bridge the gap in knowledge by undertaking a comparative analysis of Indigenous and non-Indigenous homicides in Australia.

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## Data Sources

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This paper discusses the most salient features of Indigenous and non-Indigenous homicides using data held as part of the National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP) at the Australian Institute of Criminology. Established in 1990, this program routinely collects

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Australian Institute  
of Criminology  
GPO Box 2944  
Canberra ACT 2601  
Australia

Tel: 02 6260 9221

Fax: 02 6260 9201

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data on some 77 variables relating to each incident of homicide coming to police attention in Australia, including data relating to the victim and the offender (where one has been identified). These data come from police and coronial records across Australia, and are supplemented where necessary with information provided directly by police in specific homicide investigations.

A total of 3,450 homicide incidents were recorded for the period 1 July 1989 to 30 June 2000, involving 3,723 victims and 3,783 offenders (where one has been identified by police). During this 11-year period, Indigenous persons accounted for:

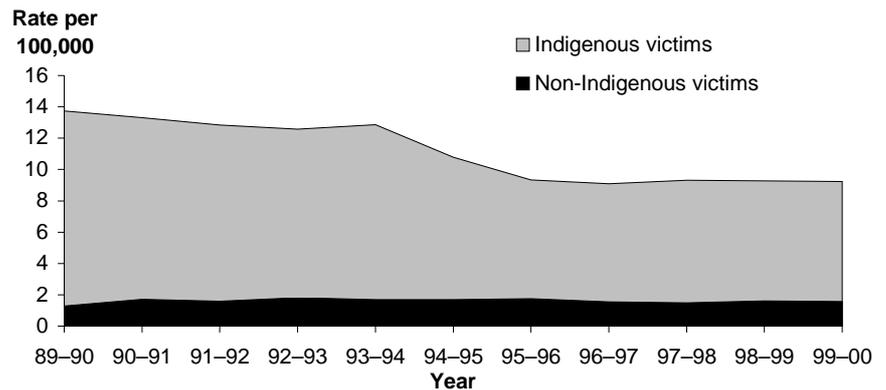
- 15.1 per cent of all homicide victims (where the victim's race was recorded—in 2.9% of cases the victim's race was "unknown"); and
- 15.7 per cent of all homicide offenders in Australia (where the offender's race was recorded—in 4.7% of cases the offender's race was "unknown").

Yet Indigenous Australians account for only about two per cent of the Australian population (ABS 2000).

### Definitional Issues

The most important limitation of the current study is the way in which the race of both the victim and offender is identified and recorded. As previously mentioned, NHMP data are derived from police records, and therefore rely on police to accurately record the race of the victim and offender. In some instances, this is merely a subjective assessment made by police, and may be based solely on the victim's or offender's external appearance. While every effort is made to accurately record such data, subjective assessments are not immune from errors or inconsistencies. Also, as the determination of one's race is mainly based on "external appearance", it is acknowledged that those persons who view themselves as Indigenous even when their external appearance does not readily identify them as

Figure 1: Homicide victimisation rates by Indigenous status, 1 July 1989 to 30 June 2000



Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, NHMP 1989–2000 [computer file]

such may consequently not be recorded as Indigenous.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, it is more likely that the results reported here under-represent rather than over-represent the true extent of Indigenous homicide in Australia. Notwithstanding this limitation, there is still a need for such research to be undertaken, especially if it assists in the identification of patterns unique to Indigenous homicides that may be amenable to appropriate intervention strategies.

### Patterns and Trends in Indigenous Homicide

#### National Overview—Victims

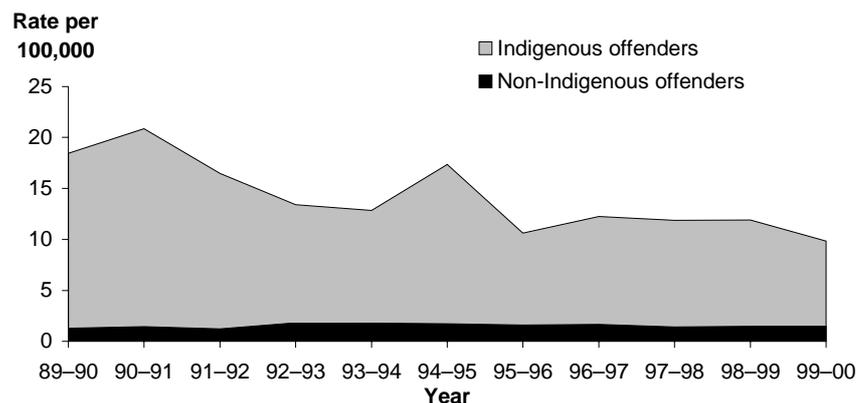
From 1989–90 to 1999–2000 there were, on average, about 42 Indigenous victims and about 286 non-Indigenous victims of homicide in Australia each year. However, although the total number of Indigenous victims was smaller than the total number

of non-Indigenous victims, Indigenous Australians have consistently recorded higher rates of homicide victimisation than non-Indigenous Australians.<sup>2</sup> During the early 1990s, the homicide victimisation rate for Indigenous persons ranged between 12.6 and 13.8 per 100,000 persons (Figure 1). From 1994–95 onwards, the homicide victimisation rate declined and is currently stable at a rate of about nine per 100,000 Indigenous persons. In contrast, the non-Indigenous homicide victimisation rate fluctuated between 1.3 and 1.8 per 100,000 persons during the 11-year period.

#### National Overview—Offenders

Across the 11-year period there were, on average, 59 Indigenous and 272 non-Indigenous offenders of homicide in Australia each year. Again, when population size is taken into account, Indigenous rates are higher than non-Indigenous rates.<sup>3</sup> Like victimisation rates, the

Figure 2: Homicide offending rates by Indigenous status, 1 July 1989 to 30 June 2000



Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, NHMP 1989–2000 [computer file]

rate of offending for Indigenous persons has exhibited a sharp decline (Figure 2). In 1990–91, the rate of offending for Indigenous persons peaked at 20.9 per 100,000 population. From that year onwards the rate of offending has declined (despite the peak in 1994–95), with a recorded rate of 9.9 per 100,000 relevant population in the most current year (1999–2000). In comparison, the non-Indigenous offending rate over the 11-year period fluctuated between 1.2 and 1.8 per 100,000.

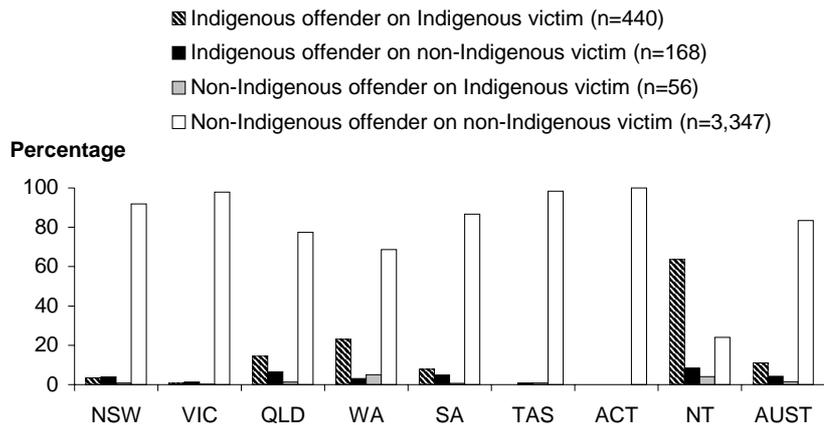
*Jurisdictional Overview*

Homicide in Australia is predominantly an *intra*-racial occurrence (James & Carcach 1997; Mouzos 2000). Across the 11-year period, only 5.6 per cent of homicides were of an *inter*-racial nature. Most homicides usually take place between non-Indigenous persons, although this varies by State and by the size of the Indigenous versus non-Indigenous population in that State (Figure 3). Despite Indigenous persons accounting for only about 29 per cent of the total population<sup>4</sup> in the Northern Territory, 63.6 per cent of homicides occurred between Indigenous persons in the Northern Territory. In Western Australia and Queensland, Indigenous persons accounted for just over three per cent of the total population, however they accounted for much higher proportions of homicide involvement. For example, 23 per cent of homicides in Western Australia and 15 per cent in Queensland involved Indigenous persons. These data suggest that Indigenous persons in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and Queensland all have higher rates of involvement in homicide.

**Comparative Analysis:  
Indigenous and Non-Indigenous  
Homicides**

Researchers in Australia and overseas have consistently observed that Indigenous persons have a much higher rate of homicide

**Figure 3: Distribution of homicides according to the Indigenous status of victims and offenders, 1 July 1989 to 30 June 2000**



Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, NHMP 1989–2000 [computer file]

victimisation and offending (see for example Moyer 1992; Silverman & Kennedy 1993; Cubbin et al. 2000; Hawkins 1999; Wallace 1986; Wilson 1982; Martin 1993). However, there has been very little recent research undertaken at the national level in Australia examining how Indigenous and non-Indigenous homicides differ.

The incident, victim and offender files of the NHMP dataset were merged in order to create one file linking each incident, victim(s) and offender(s). In some incidents, there was more than one victim and/or offender. For the purposes of the analysis, “Indigenous homicides” included all cases where **both** the victim’s and the offender’s racial appearance were recorded by police as either “Aboriginal” or “Torres Strait Islander” (n=440). That is, for the purposes of this report, “Indigenous homicides” refers to those homicides which only include an Indigenous victim and offender. All remaining cases were classified as “non-Indigenous homicides” (n=3,571). The *inter*-racial nature of homicide will be the subject of a separate report.

**Results of the  
Comparative Analysis**

A number of significant differences were revealed when Indigenous and non-Indigenous homicides were compared on incident, victim and offender characteristics

(see Table 1). Each of these differences will be discussed in turn.

*Incident Characteristics*

The geographical distribution of homicide in Australia mirrors the geographical distribution of the Australian population (Mouzos 2000). While most homicides, regardless of the racial background of victim and offender, occurred in an urban area, a significantly greater proportion of Indigenous homicides occurred in a rural location compared to non-Indigenous homicides (46.1% and 15.9% respectively) (see also Martin 1993). This is not unexpected given that Indigenous persons are more likely than non-Indigenous persons to live in rural areas (ABS 1997). Silverman and Kennedy (1993) report similar findings. They found that Canadian Indians were more likely to be involved in murder in non-metropolitan areas (20.9%) than in metropolitan areas (5.7%).

Overall, about 13 per cent of homicides in Australia occur in the course of other crime. However, the comparative analysis indicates that significantly fewer Indigenous homicides occur in the course of other crime. Over the 11-year period examined, only four per cent of Indigenous homicides occurred during the course of another crime (such as a robbery or sexual assault) whereas 16 per cent of non-Indigenous homicides occurred during the commission

of another offence. Moyer (1992, p. 391) reported similar findings in Canada: “non-Aboriginals are about three times as likely to be killed under these circumstances (16% versus 5%)”.

Another significant difference was that a greater proportion of Indigenous homicides than non-Indigenous homicides involved one-on-one interactions (83.4% and 58.5% respectively). Similarly, Indigenous homicides were less likely to result in multiple fatalities (3.7% and 11.1% respectively).

*Victim and Offender Characteristics*

International research has consistently found race and gender differences for homicide victims and offenders (Wolfgang 1958; Silverman & Kennedy 1993). Similar gender and race patterns characterise homicide in Australia. For example, Indigenous homicides were significantly more likely than non-Indigenous homicides to involve a female as either a victim or an offender. One-fifth of all Indigenous homicides involved a female offender compared to only one-tenth of non-Indigenous homicides. When Indigenous females killed, just under three-quarters of their victims were male intimate partners (n=46). However, when non-Indigenous women killed, only 44 per cent of victims were male intimate partners (n=132).

Many commentators have documented the economic and social marginalisation and cultural fragmentation of Indigenous communities in Australia (see, for example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence 2000; Silverman & Kennedy 1993 in Canada). In the United States, Blau and Schwartz (1984, p. 180) suggest that racial inequality as a result of blocked opportunities has important consequences for the ways in which conflict is expressed, and thus contributes to the rate of offending of the racially disadvantaged group:

If a minority’s endeavours to obtain a fair share of resources are consistently frustrated, it means their attempts to give realistic expression to their

conflict of interest are blocked ...The blocking of realistic conflict produces the pent-up aggression, which manifests itself in diffuse hostility and violence.

It is not surprising, then, to find that a greater proportion of

Indigenous than non-Indigenous homicides involved persons who were not working at the time of the incident (96% versus 90%). Also, Indigenous homicides were more likely to involve persons who have been married or in a

**Table 1: Comparison of Indigenous and non-Indigenous homicides, 1989–90 to 1999–2000**

Circumstances and characteristics	Indigenous homicides (n=440)		Non-Indigenous homicides (n=3,571)	
	%	(No.)	%	(No.)
<i>Location of incident</i>				
Residential premise	58.9	(259)	58.8	(2,098)
Other location	41.1	(181)	41.3	(1,473)
<i>Course of other crime</i>				
Yes	**3.6	(16)	16.1	(573)
No	**96.1	(423)	80.7	(2,882)
<i>Type of area</i>				
Urban	**49.3	(217)	86.5	(3,088)
Rural	**46.1	(203)	15.9	(363)
<i>Single versus multiple victims and offenders</i>				
Single victim–single offender	**83.4	(367)	58.5	(2,088)
Single victim–multiple offenders	**13.0	(57)	30.4	(1,085)
Multiple victims–single offender	**3.2	(14)	9.9	(355)
Multiple victims–multiple offenders	*0.5	(2)	1.2	(43)
<i>Gender</i>				
Male offender on male victim	**44.3	(195)	59.0	(2,106)
Male offender on female victim	**35.9	(158)	28.5	(1,019)
Female offender on female victim	4.8	(21)	3.1	(110)
Female offender on male victim	**15.0	(66)	8.4	(301)
<i>Age</i>				
Victim younger than offender	47.5	(209)	43.7	(1,561)
Victim same age as offender	5.2	(23)	5.3	(192)
Victim older than offender	47.3	(208)	50.7	(1,812)
<i>Employment status</i>				
Victim and offender working	**4.1	(18)	10.0	(357)
Neither victim and offender working	*95.9	(422)	90.0	(3,214)
<i>Marital status</i>				
Victim and offender never married	*22.5	(99)	29.2	(1,043)
Victim and offender ever married/de facto	*77.5	(341)	70.8	(2,528)
<i>Motive of the killing</i>				
Domestic altercation (jealousy, desertion)	**45.0	(198)	23.7	(847)
Alcohol-related argument	**29.3	(129)	10.5	(374)
Other argument (e.g. money, drugs, etc.)	**13.2	(58)	33.4	(1,193)
No apparent motive/unknown	**12.5	(55)	32.4	(1,157)
<i>Type of weapon used</i>				
Knife and other sharp instrument	**47.5	(209)	30.1	(1,074)
Hands/feet	28.0	(123)	25.6	(914)
Firearm	**5.7	(25)	20.8	(742)
Other weapon#	15.2	(67)	15.0	(537)
<i>Alcohol involvement</i>				
Both victim and offender drinking	**69.3	(305)	23.4	(836)
Victim drinking but not offender	4.8	(21)	5.3	(189)
Offender drinking but not victim	9.3	(41)	9.9	(355)
Neither victim nor offender drinking	**16.6	(73)	61.4	(2,191)
<i>Victim–offender relationship</i>				
Intimate partners	**38.0	(167)	18.9	(675)
Other family	**22.7	(100)	13.8	(494)
Friends and acquaintances	26.8	(118)	29.7	(1,059)
Strangers	**2.7	(12)	21.2	(756)
Other relationship	7.1	(31)	9.6	(343)

\*\*p<0.01 \*p<0.05

# Includes blunt instrument, explosives, fire, poison, drugs and other weapons.

Note: Some percentages do not add up to 100 because “unknown” and “not stated” cases have been excluded.

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, NHMP 1989–2000 [computer file]

de facto relationship than non-Indigenous homicides (78% versus 71%).

Racial differences were also noted for particular methods of inflicting death and weapons used to kill. While a greater proportion of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous victims are killed with a knife or some other sharp instrument, significantly fewer Indigenous victims are killed with a firearm—only 5.7 per cent compared to 20.8 per cent of non-Indigenous victims.

There is a close association between race and the victim–offender relationship (Wolfgang 1958; Moyer 1992; Silverman & Kennedy 1993; Mouzos 1999). Australian data also support this association. Sixty-one per cent of Indigenous homicides occurred between family members (38% intimates; 23% other family), whereas only 33 per cent of non-Indigenous homicides occurred between family members. Similar findings have been published in Canada (Moyer 1992). However, a more striking finding is the number of Indigenous persons killed by a stranger. Only 12 Indigenous persons were killed by a stranger (2.7%), compared to 756 non-Indigenous persons (21.2%). This finding again emphasises the distinctiveness of Indigenous homicides.

Just under half of all Indigenous homicides occur as a result of a domestic altercation (45.0% versus 23.7% for non-Indigenous homicides). Furthermore, a greater proportion of Indigenous homicides resulted from an alcohol-related incident than non-Indigenous homicides (29.3% versus 10.5%). While this suggests that alcohol does not play a major role in Indigenous homicides, when the level of alcohol involvement is measured in terms of whether the victim or offender was under the influence, a different picture emerges. Just under three-quarters of Indigenous homicides involved *both* the victim and offender having consumed alcohol at the time of the offence (69.3%). In contrast, only 23.4 per cent of non-Indigenous homicides

involved both the victim and offender drinking alcohol at the time of the incident.

### Implications for Policy

The findings of the comparative analysis strongly suggest that Indigenous homicides are qualitatively different from non-Indigenous homicides in Australia. Indigenous homicides were found to occur predominantly within the family environment, with a high proportion of female involvement as either victims or offenders. Many of the incidents resulted from some form of domestic altercation, many of which were “by and large, impulsive and unpremeditated” (Hunter 1993, p. 152). Another feature of Indigenous homicides was the presence of alcohol. Just over four out of five Indigenous homicides involved either the victim or offender, or both, drinking at the time of the incident (Table 1). Knives were the most common weapon of choice.

It is important to emphasise that there are historical and cultural differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence (2000, p. ix) recently indicated that:

The high incidence of violent crime in some Indigenous communities, particularly in remote and rural regions, is exacerbated by factors not present in the broader Australian community...Dispossession, cultural fragmentation and marginalisation have contributed to the current crisis in which many Indigenous persons find themselves; high unemployment, poor health, low educational attainment and poverty have become endemic elements in Indigenous lives...

These findings have significant implications for policy. First, they reiterate the need for proactive interventions to address some of the issues raised in this study, such as the higher rates of victimisation and offending for Indigenous persons, as well as the high level of alcohol consumption

prior to the homicides. However, this does not mean simply increasing funding to detoxification services for Indigenous persons. Such a move would do little to address the underlying issues associated with alcohol use and dependence, such as educational failure, family breakdown, the lack of meaningful employment and economic stagnation (Hamel, Lincoln & Herd 1999; Hazelhurst 1997).

Three recent reports (Hazelhurst 1997; Memmott et al. 2000; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence 2000) have examined the facets of Indigenous violence, and highlight a number of strategies aimed at combating Indigenous violence, especially violence within the family. They suggest the need for:

- education mediums and forums as a source of empowerment (early intervention agent);
- health improvements (multi-service delivery centres, community clinics, health education, community detoxification centres, etc);
- supporting families;
- housing (rural and remote communities);
- community-driven programs that foster community development and social recovery at the local and regional level, focused on self-determination;
- economic development and sustainability;
- composite violence programs that provide a more holistic approach to community violence;
- community agencies to establish linkages and working relationships with each other and with relevant government agencies (whole-of-community/whole-of-government interface);
- shelters and security for escaping violence (greater access to shelters, etc); and
- healing and Indigenous cultural promotion (cultural reintegration programs).

Most of these strategies fall under one of four areas—health, housing, education and employment. The Federal Government recently committed \$2.3 billion to address

Indigenous-specific activities in these areas (National Crime Prevention 2001).

While it is important to identify the factors that differentiate Indigenous homicides from non-Indigenous homicides, further work is required to understand the processes that bring about these differences. Without this knowledge base, prevention and intervention policies will not be successful in reducing violence in Indigenous communities, and especially lethal violence.

## Notes

- 1 According to the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989*, Section 4, "Aboriginal person" means "a person of the Aboriginal race of Australia". Recently, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has analysed the quality of Indigenous status data and racial appearance data collected by New South Wales police. Results of this study indicate that when racial appearance data were compared with Indigenous status data asked by the police, the data quality of Indigenous status based on racial appearance was fairly good, but the data quality for Torres Strait Islanders was poor (National Centre for Crime and Justice Statistics [ABS] and New South Wales Police, cited in SCRCSSP 2001, p. 382).
- 2 Indigenous population was based on data contained in the following ABS publications: *Experimental Estimates of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population (1990-95)* (cat. no. 3230.0); *Experimental Projections, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population (1996-2000)* (cat. no. 3231.0). Non-Indigenous population was based on subtracting Indigenous resident estimates from the total estimated resident population contained in the ABS publication *Estimated Resident Population by Sex and Age, States and Territories Australia (1990-2000)* (cat. no. 3201.0).
- 3 See note 2.
- 4 Calculated by dividing the sum total of the Indigenous population between 1990 and 2000 (divided by 11) and the sum total resident population between 1990 and 2000 (divided by 11) and then multiplying by 100 for percentage.

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Jenny Mouzos is a Research Analyst with 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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