



No. 255

# Family Homicide in Australia

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*The family is viewed by most people as providing a nurturing and loving environment. But for some, the family environment can be deadly. In Australia, almost two in five homicides occur between family members, with an average of 129 family homicides each year. The majority of family homicides occur between intimate partners (60 per cent), and three-quarters of intimate partner homicides involve males killing their female partners. On average, 25 children are killed each year by a parent, with children under the age of one at the highest risk of victimisation. The less common types of family homicide include children killing their parents (12 incidents per year), homicide between siblings (six incidents per year), and homicides between other family members (11 incidents per year). This paper explores the differences in the characteristics of the various types of family homicides in Australia and highlights the need for specific prevention strategies to target these homicides.*

**Adam Graycar**  
Director

Contrary to public perceptions that we are most at risk of being murdered by a stranger, homicides in Australia and elsewhere are most likely to involve persons who are known to each other, such as friends, acquaintances and family members. As Wolfgang (1958, p. 203) noted almost half a century ago:

Criminal homicide is probably the most personalised crime in our society...[it involves] a dynamic relationship between two or more persons caught up in a life drama where they operate in a direct, interactional relationship. More so than in any other violation of conduct norms, the relationship the victim bears to the offender plays a role in explaining the reasons for such flagrant violation.

Many subsequent authors have also noted the importance of the victim-offender relationship, and how the characteristics of the homicide itself will vary depending on who gets killed and who does the killing (Silverman & Kennedy 1987; Polk 1994; Saltzman & Mercy 1993). This is particularly important in the context of family homicides, which can encompass various types of victim-offender relationship, such as intimate partners, parents killing children, children killing parents, siblings killing each other, and so on.

Most international research to date has focused predominantly on examining "family homicide" as a single entity. Few studies have explored, compared and contrasted the various types of family homicides in order to determine how they are similar and dissimilar. The purpose of this paper is to examine the different circumstances and characteristics of family homicide in Australia over a 13-year period. The examination includes details about the homicide of intimates, children, parents and other family members.

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## Definition of Homicide

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The term "homicide" refers to a person killed, and a homicide "incident" is an event in which one or more persons are killed at the same place and time. For the purposes of the National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP) (which is the source of data for the present study), the definition of homicide is the operational

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definition used by police throughout Australia. As such, the NHMP collects data on the following incidents:

- all cases resulting in a person or persons being charged with murder or manslaughter (including the charge of “dangerous act causing death” which applies to the Northern Territory)—this excludes other driving-related fatalities, except where these immediately follow a criminal event, such as armed robbery or motor vehicle theft;
- all murder–suicides as classed by police (where the offender ultimately commits suicide); and
- all other deaths classed by police as homicide (including infanticide), even though no offender has been apprehended.

Attempted murder is excluded, as are violent deaths such as industrial accidents involving criminal negligence (unless a charge of manslaughter is laid). Lawful homicide, which includes incidents involving police in the course of their duties, is also excluded.

### Definition of Family Homicide

For the purposes of this study, family homicide includes the following:

- intimate partner: current and former intimate partners (married and cohabiting/de facto);
- filicide: custodial and non-custodial parents (or step-parents) killing their child(ren);
- parricide: children killing their parent(s);
- siblicide: homicide between siblings; and
- other family: the killing of cousins, in-laws and so on.

### Data Sources

The current study analysed data held as part of the NHMP at the Australian Institute of Criminology. In brief, the NHMP data set holds details pertaining to the incident, victim, offender, and the relationship between the victim and offender (a total of 77 variables). Currently, this data set has details for a total of 4,112 homicide incidents, 4,501 identified offenders and 4,421 victims of homicide, which occurred in Australia between 1 July 1989 and 30 June 2002.

### Prevalence

Of the 4,421 victims of homicide during the 13-year period, 1,671 (or 38 per cent) were killed by a family member (as the primary offender). On average, about 129 family homicides occur each year, with intimate partner homicides accounting for three out of five family homicides (Figure 1). Siblicide is the least common type of family homicide in Australia, with fewer than six homicides per year.

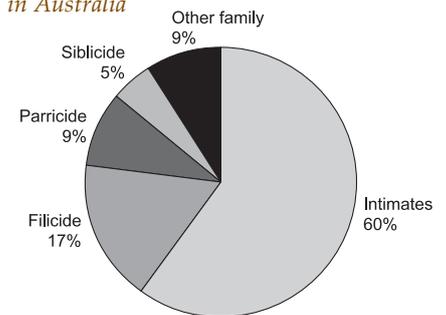
### Intimate Partner Homicide

Over the 13-year period covered by this analysis there were 77 intimate partner homicides, on average, each year. The majority involved males killing female intimate partners (75 per cent). Females comprised only 20 per cent of offenders of intimate partner homicide, confirming prior research that males are more likely than females to kill their intimate partner (Johnson & Hotton 2003; Silverman & Kennedy 1993; Silverman & Mukherjee 1987; Websdale 1999).

Intimate partner homicide has been conceptualised according to the state of the relationship (intact or estranged) and relationship status (legal marriage, cohabiting, dating) (Dawson & Gartner 1998). Previous research finds that in terms of relationship state, women who have separated are at higher risk of homicide victimisation by intimate partners than women in current relationships (Hotton 2001; Wilson & Daly 1993; Johnson & Hotton 2003; Wallace 1986; Barnard et al. 1982). The present study indicates that a quarter of the intimate partner homicides occurred between separated, former, or divorced couples. Of these estranged couples, 84 per cent involved women as victims.

Previous research has also found that men and women in cohabiting relationships are at a much greater risk of being killed by their partners than are married men and women (Daly & Wilson 1988; Wilson, Johnson & Daly 1995; Shackelford 2001; Mouzos & Shackelford forthcoming). The present study indicates that a slightly higher proportion of

Figure 1: Distribution of family homicides in Australia



Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, National Homicide Monitoring Program, 1989–90 to 2001–02 [computer file]

intimate partner homicides occurred between cohabiting persons (34 per cent) than between married persons (33 per cent). In absolute terms, there appears to be little difference in risk of victimisation. However, recent Australian research that examined rates of intimate partner homicide by women and relationship status, indicated that men in cohabiting relationships incur a significantly higher risk of homicide than men in marital relationships (16 times higher; see Mouzos & Shackelford forthcoming).

Demographic differences in intimate partner homicides have also been noted. Racial disparity is one example. Research in the United States reports that minority populations consistently record higher rates of both homicide victimisation and offending (Fingerhut & Kleinman 1990; Hawkins 1999). Despite Indigenous persons representing just over two per cent of the total Australian population, they account for just under a quarter of the intimate partner homicides (as both victims and offenders). Previous research on Indigenous Australian homicide finds that these homicides are quite different from non-Indigenous homicides in that they very rarely occur between strangers, and mostly involve family members, usually intimate partners. A high level of alcohol involvement is also apparent in Indigenous homicides (see Mouzos 2001). Violence, particularly family violence, within the Indigenous community is well documented and has been linked with dispossession, marginalisation, unemployment and poverty (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s

Task Force on Violence 2000). Much violence within Indigenous communities has also been associated with the use of alcohol (Gray & Saggars 1998; Brady 1998; Alexander 1990).

Given the age structure of intimate relationships—males are usually older than their female partners—it was not unexpected to find that when male intimates were killed, they were more likely to be older than the offender (53 per cent), whereas females killed by their intimate partner were more likely to be younger than the offender (68 per cent).

In terms of the type of weapons used in intimate partner homicides, knives and other sharp instruments were used in 40 per cent of homicides. This was followed by assaultive force (that is, with hands and/or feet; 22 per cent) and firearms (22 per cent). Blunt instruments were used in one out of 10 intimate partner homicides. A higher proportion of female intimates than male intimates were beaten to death (27 per cent versus eight per cent), whereas a higher proportion of male intimates than female intimates were stabbed to death (55 per cent versus 33 per cent).

It has been suggested that intimate partner homicide is at the extreme end of a continuum of domestic violence (Websdale 1999). In his research, Websdale found that the male perpetrators of intimate partner homicide had all used violence as a form of control against their female partners for a considerable time prior to the homicide. He likened his work to that of Hanmer, who noted that male violence against women is “designed to control, dominate and express authority and power” (Hanmer 1996, cited in Websdale 1999, p. 207). Wallace (1986, p. 23) similarly noted in her study of homicide in New South Wales that men killing their spouses was a reflection of the ultimate attempt of the males to exert “their power and control over their wives”.

Most domestic violence usually occurs within the privacy of the home. Intimate partner homicide is no different. Accordingly, four out of five intimate partner homicides occurred in a private dwelling,

with almost two in five (39 per cent) occurring between partners with a known history of domestic violence. The majority took place during the evening or early morning (between 6pm and 6am), and on a weekday (70 per cent).

When the motive for intimate partner homicides is examined, more than half (53 per cent) stemmed from a domestic altercation between the victim and offender. Slightly less than three in 10 (29 per cent) were believed to stem from jealousy or desertion/termination of the relationship (actual or pending). This is consistent with the findings of Johnson and Hotton’s (2003) Canadian study, where it was shown that an argument was the most common motive (45 per cent) for intimate partner homicides, with jealousy being involved in more than one in five cases (23 per cent).

### Filicide

Newspaper reports late in 2002 reported a father receiving a term of life imprisonment for killing his three children. The reports termed these homicides as “abominable crimes” (Daily Telegraph 2002). Few other crimes provoke as much outrage in society. This is especially true when parents, who are supposed to protect and nurture their children, take their lives in the most unnatural of acts.

Between 1 July 1989 and 30 June 2002 there were, on average, 25 children killed by their parents each year. Three-quarters of these homicides were committed in a residential location. Just over half of the filicides occurred during the day (54 per cent).

In terms of the gender of the victims, both males and females experienced a relatively similar level of risk of homicide by a parent. Younger children were at a higher risk of filicide than older children, with 68 per cent of all victims aged five years or younger. Children younger than one year experienced the highest level of victimisation, accounting for 26 per cent of all filicide victims.

Gender differences were observed among offenders (Figure 2). While fathers were responsible for the majority of filicides in Australia (63 per cent compared to 37 per cent), in terms of absolute numbers, more four- and five-year-olds were killed by their mother (n=21) than by their father (n=16).

The types of weapons used in filicide were different to those most commonly used in intimate partner homicide. This finding reflects the vulnerability of children, particularly young children. Just under half of all filicide victims were killed with the use of assaultive force (46 per cent), followed by a knife or other sharp instrument (13 per cent). A further 10 per cent were killed by poison, including carbon monoxide poisoning, through the use of a motor vehicle, with the parent usually attempting or committing suicide in the incident.

The underlying motive behind incidents of filicide are difficult to explain (Mouzos 2000). This is evident in the analysis of filicides in Australia, where the motive was undetermined in three out of five cases (61 per cent). The most prevalent motives, where known, were domestic altercations (21 per cent) and jealousy/termination of a relationship—where the child is

Figure 2: Age distribution of victims of filicide by gender of offender



Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, National Homicide Monitoring Program, 1989–90 to 2001–02 [computer file]

killed by one parent as a consequence of the actual or pending separation from the other parent (nine per cent). Recent research on child deaths in New South Wales reported that family breakdown was a precipitating factor in almost one in five filicides, and parental mental illness in three out of 10 filicides (adapted from Lawrence & Fattore 2002). Based on information available at the time of data collection, the present study found that 15 per cent of filicide offenders were suffering from a mental disorder immediately before or at the time of the homicide incident. One-third of the female filicide offenders were found to be mentally ill. In the present study, a quarter of the filicides involved the parent also committing suicide following the event. This compares to about six per cent of murder-suicides in the general homicide offender population (Mouzos 2002).

### Parricide

The term parricide refers to the killing of one's father (patricide) or mother (matricide). The literature suggests that there are various types of parricidal offenders. For example, Heide (1992) suggests that three types of individuals commit parricide:

- severely abused children who are pushed beyond their limits;
- severely mentally ill children; and
- dangerously antisocial children.

Previous research also suggests that the most common type of parricidal offender is the severely abused child. Mones (1991) reports that more than 90 per cent of youths who commit parricide have been previously abused by their parents. This abuse can take the form of physical, psychological, sexual and verbal abuse.

Furthermore, Murray (1999) suggests that, excluding mentally ill offenders and cases of so-called mercy killing, there are four main types of parricide:

- impulsive—such as when the child kills for monetary gain, but does so in a badly thought out manner;

- reactionary—where the child kills as the direct reaction to an event such as an argument or sexual assault;
- retaliatory—where the child kills as the result of long-term abuse by the parent; and
- calculated—where the child plans the murder of their parent, regardless of the triggering event.

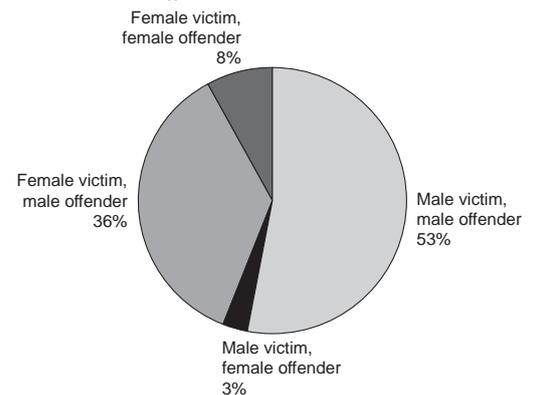
Murray suggests that, of each of these types of parricide, reactionary parricides are most similar to homicides occurring in the general community.

In Australia there are about 12 parricides committed annually. The overwhelming majority occur in a residential location (94 per cent) and during the evening. As with research examining parricide in reported legal cases in Canada (Murray 1999), the majority of offenders and victims are male—just over half of all parricides involved a male victim and offender. Daughters are more likely to kill their mothers than their fathers (Figure 3).

As with filicides, the motive behind parricides can be difficult to explain. In the present study, a domestic argument was the most prevalent motive (49 per cent) for parricides, although a motive was not determined in 30 per cent of cases. Revenge killings, such as the killing of a parent for previous abuse suffered by the offender, was the motive in less than one-tenth (nine per cent) of all parricides. The use of alcohol by either the victim, offender or both parties was present in one-third (33 per cent) of parricides.

Similar to intimate partner homicides, a knife or other sharp instrument was the most common weapon used to commit parricide (44 per cent), followed by a firearm (23 per cent) or assaultive force (19 per cent). This did not vary by the gender of the victims. These results are similar to those of an analysis of parricide conducted in 1997 by Weisman and Sharma (cited in Underwood & Patch 1999), which found knives to be significantly more common in incidents of parricide. Compared to filicide, few parricides in Australia involved the death of the offender (nine per cent), with no female parricide offenders committing suicide following the murder.

Figure 3: Gender distribution of parricide victims and offenders



Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, National Homicide Monitoring Program, 1989–90 to 2001–02 [computer file]

### Siblicide

There is a paucity of research on violence between siblings, especially lethal violence. Of the limited research available, the consensus is that the most common circumstances preceding siblicides were some form of argument. However, Ewing (1997, p. 117) explains that the precipitating circumstances may in fact be more complex than they appear:

...the answer [to why siblings kill one another] may lie in the nature of the sibling bond and the long-standing rivalries and conflicts that so often mark the relationships between perpetrators and victims in cases of fratricide [brother] and sororicide [sister].

In Australia there are, on average, about six homicides a year between siblings. Like other family homicides, most occur in a residential location (79 per cent) and during the evening (58 per cent).

Available research suggests that, as with other types of homicide, the victim of a siblicide is likely to be a brother, regardless of the gender of the offender (Wallace 1986; Underwood & Patch 1999; Ewing 1997; Daly et al. 2001). The present research offers further support, with four out of five siblicides involving the killing of a brother. All five female siblicide offenders killed their brother. As with other types of family homicide, a domestic argument was the most prevalent motive for siblicide (42 per cent), followed by an alcohol-related argument (15 per cent). The motive was not known in 22 per cent of cases.

In an analysis of siblicides in Canada, Britain, Japan and Chicago, Daly et al. (2001) found that siblicide offenders tended to be younger than the victim, particularly in the case of male-on-male siblicide. They suggest that the reason for this lies in the “older brother’s presumption of authority and entitlement that fuels violent resentment in the younger” (Daly et al. 2001, p. 43). The current research supports this finding, with 53 per cent of siblicides involving a younger sibling killing an older sibling. Interestingly, all siblicides in the current research were committed by an offender acting alone. A knife or other sharp instrument was the most common weapon used (41 per cent), followed by assaultive force (17 per cent). Firearms and blunt instruments were employed equally (14 per cent) in siblicide.

### Other Family Homicide

Each year in Australia there are, on average, 11 homicides that occur between other family members. This includes cousins, in-laws, grandparents and other family. As with intimate partner homicides, filicides and siblicides, most other family homicides take place at a residential location (76 per cent).

Wallace (1986) reported that the common theme running through other family homicides and particularly in-law killings, was marital conflict and marital violence:

The domestic dispute had spread to include other members of the family who adopted a protective role of the abused spouse, the wife. It was this involvement which eventually led to their becoming embroiled in a violent clash with their in-laws. (Wallace 1986, p. 157)

Most other family homicides are committed by males (88 per cent), with the gender of victims closely resembling the distribution of homicide victims in general (63 per cent male; 37 per cent female). A high proportion of other family homicides involved an Indigenous victim and offender (33 per cent), which may reflect the extended nature of many Indigenous family relationships. Similar to siblicide, the victim of other family homicide is usually older than the offender

(56 per cent). In addition, a knife or other sharp instrument is the most common weapon of choice (38 per cent), followed by assaultive force (28 per cent) and a firearm (23 per cent).

As with other types of family homicide, a domestic argument was the most prevalent motive, although to a lesser extent (23 per cent). This was followed by an alcohol-related argument (18 per cent). The motive was not known in 28 per cent of other family homicides. A very small proportion (four per cent) resulted in the offender committing suicide following the incident.

### Concluding Comments

This paper has examined the circumstances and characteristics of the various types of family homicide in Australia between 1 July 1989 and 30 June 2002. Differences emerged between types of family homicide in terms of the weapons used, gender distribution of victims and offenders, and temporal characteristics. This contribution has important implications for policy, as the results provide a basis for targeting intervention efforts toward those distinctive types of family relationships in which lethal violence is more prevalent, for instance, between intimate partners and between parents and children.

Research overseas suggests that greater awareness and resources directed at the plight of women in domestic situations aids in the prevention of women killing their partners. Browne and Williams (1989) argued that increasing resources for battered women would result in a decline in female-perpetrated intimate homicide. The rapid proliferation of shelters across the United States and the recent decline in homicides by women (Pollock 1999, p. 31) suggests that this prediction was accurate.

Dugan and colleagues (1997; 1999) consider additional factors contributing to the decline. They posit that the decline in intimate partner homicides in the US was possibly a result of three things:

- a decline in domesticity (as measured by marriage and divorce rates);

- improved economic status of women and financial independence; and
- growth in domestic violence resources.

These factors suggest that as women’s social status improves and they are afforded more options, they are less likely to resort to lethal violence.

Connected to this is the need for greater accessibility to the law for women in domestic situations. This would include the consistent enforcement of restraining orders by police and tougher penalties for violation. Apsler et al. (2002) suggest that police should move beyond their customary role of stopping the violence, obtaining aid for the injured and following procedures in dealing with perpetrators. Police could provide follow-up visits and support for taking action, whether the action involves bringing charges, seeking assistance from a shelter, or moving away from the abuser. There is a need to move towards more proactive policing. This is only one avenue of redress.

The use of perpetrator programs for violent males is another avenue available for the prevention of male-perpetrated intimate partner homicide. Perpetrator programs may be undertaken either voluntarily or under court order, and aim to end the violence, rather than “cure” the offender. For further discussion of perpetrator programs, refer to National Crime Prevention (1999).

Children in Australia are most at risk of homicide victimisation by a parent than any other person (Mouzos 2000). Similarly to intimate partner homicide, there is a need to view and address the prevention of child homicide in the context of the broader problem of family violence. Programs aimed at educating parents about appropriate parenting behaviours are one such measure that can be taken. These programs may educate parents about the vulnerability of children and their susceptibility to unintended injury, offer support services for young inexperienced mothers or teach parents non-violent coping skills (Scott 1995; Mouzos 2000). Other prevention strategies include:

- the use of home visitation programs for the families of

children who have been deemed to be "at risk" of abuse; or

- the use of child protection orders for children who have come to the attention of their jurisdictional community services department, and the careful monitoring of children under these orders.

Human services, law enforcement and other related agencies all play a role in the prevention of child homicide. The early recognition of warning signs of unsafe family situations would enable protective or supportive services to be provided (Lawrence & Fattore 2002, p. 142), thus minimising the risk of homicide.

Children are not just at risk of homicide through fatal abuse incidents; family breakdown has also been identified as a precipitating factor in some filicides. The improvement of counselling and support services for separating parents may play an important role in reducing child homicide in these instances. Other family and friends may also play a vital role by raising the alarm if they notice a family breakdown affecting the parents' mental health and by encouraging the parents to seek medical or other assistance in dealing with possible illnesses such as depression resulting from the separation.

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