

## The murder of overseas visitors in Australia

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*During 2005, there were 5.5 million visitor arrivals to Australia, a five percent increase over the previous year (Tourism Australia 2006). Despite some media headlines labelling Australia as an unsafe place to visit, this paper provides factual information indicating that the risk of homicide victimisation faced by tourists who visit Australia is extremely low. Between 1994 and 2003, the murder rate of tourists was 0.9 per million short-term visitors to Australia. In the most recent year for which data are available there were only two tourists murdered. Those most likely to be victims of homicide are young males, which reflects the general profile of homicides in Australia more broadly. This paper focuses on the most serious of violent crimes – homicide – and although it demonstrates that the risk of victimisation is extremely low for visitors to Australia, further work on other violent crimes such as assault and robbery would be informative.*

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### Purpose of the study

During the past few years, the reporting of the murder of three overseas visitors in South Australia, Queensland, and the Northern Territory has generated immense public interest in Australia and considerable interest in their home nations of Japan and the United Kingdom. The main focus of the media has been on issues of the personal safety or security of intending visitors, and whether Australia is a safe place to visit. Despite the heightened awareness of the issue, there is little reliable data available to quantify the actual risk of lethal violence faced by overseas tourists in Australia.

There are two main aims of the current research:

- determine the relative risk of homicide faced by overseas visitors in Australia
- examine the nature of homicide of overseas tourists in Australia.

### Media impact on perception of safety

Adverse media coverage and the public's perception of personal safety will have a significant and lasting effect on the decision to travel to a particular destination (Dimanche & Lepetic 1999). The murder of overseas visitors in Australia has generally received widespread media coverage in both Australia and the home country of the victim. In some cases, the media reporting has been less than balanced and tended to stimulate fear and concern that Australia is not a safe place to visit.

Murder is a crime that invokes widespread curiosity. A particular aspect of a murder is often sought by the media in order to increase public interest. What differentiates one murder from another in terms of media interest is often the extent to which the public is likely to be shocked, amazed or even fearful of the event and its implications. It is not surprising that the murder of an overseas visitor in a foreign country satisfies all the requisite criteria.

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## Perpetuating the myth

Britain provides a steady stream of overseas visitors to Australia. Many Britons who visit Australia as tourists travel the country as backpackers. The British press continues to portray Australia as a country of some considerable risk to its citizens. Spectacular headlines such as *Britons who see Australia and die*, do little to encourage tourism. This article quoted official Australian figures and explained that nearly 400 tourists a year (0.01%) die visiting Australia. While most of the deaths are attributed to accidents and health-related issues, the article stated that during the review period, 22 persons died from an unlawful assault or, in other words, were murdered (Guardian 2003). The report mentioned the murder of Peter Falconio and the Childers backpackers fire that claimed 15 lives, but did not clarify that one incident claimed almost 70 percent of the victims of unlawful killings.

In 2004, the British press reporting the trial of murdered British backpacker Caroline Stuttle drew links to another unrelated incident which took the lives of seven British tourists two years earlier. Although the cases were unrelated, were two years apart, and some one million tourists had visited Australia unharmed in the meantime, the British media nonetheless chose to draw a tenuous geographical link to the two incidents (Fickling 2004): 'Bundaburg is 30 miles east of Childers, where an itinerant fruit picker, Robert Long, killed 15 people, including seven Britons...in 2000'.

The article tried to endorse and give prominence to the link by introducing Australia as a country in the grip of a continuing series of 'overseas visitor murders' by saying 'Ms Stuttle's death came at a bad time for Australia's tourist industry'.

With some 14,000 short term visitors arriving in Australia each day (ABS 2006a) any adverse publicity that raises the fear of crime, particularly the fear of being murdered, stands to significantly harm Australia's reputation as a safe place to visit.

## Definitions

There are at least 14 different types of visa for overseas visitors travelling in Australia. For the purposes of this study an overseas visitor was defined as any person who, at the time of their murder, was the holder of a valid:

- working holiday visa
- short stay visitor visa
- long stay visitor visa
- sponsored business/family visitor visa
- student visa (for more information see Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs 2004).

Special Category Visas (SCV) for New Zealand passport holders were not included. In September 1994, amendments to the *Migration Act 1958* introduced this category whereby New Zealand citizens coming to Australia need only a valid New Zealand passport, not a visa outlining their reason for travelling. As the precise nature of their travel could not be distinguished between genuine tourist or employment etc, visitors from New Zealand have not been included in the figures.

## The nature and extent of international tourism in Australia

The level of growth in international tourism in Australia in the past decade ranks among the highest in the world. The number of international inbound visitors to Australia increased 86 percent in the decade 1992 to 2002 (ABS 2004).

The number of inbound visitors to Australia fluctuates on a yearly basis, with high numbers associated with international tourist events, such as the Sydney Olympics. Official estimates indicate that annual international visitor arrivals to Australia will reach 7.6 million by 2007 (Thompson 1998).

Visitors from New Zealand and the United Kingdom make up about one-third of international arrivals. Visitors from Asian countries account for just over 40 percent of arrivals. The main overseas visitor destinations are New South Wales

and Queensland. In 2003 New South Wales and Queensland accounted for 55 percent of bed nights spent in Australia by overseas visitors (ABS 2005). Overall, the inbound visitor contribution to the GDP in 2002–03 was \$7.6 billion (ABS 2005).

Given the significant contribution tourism makes to Australia's economy, it is important that information disseminated to potential tourists to Australia in relation to their safety accurately portrays the level of risk.

## Previous research

Previous research has been predominantly concerned with the general health and safety of tourists and associated crime rates in areas frequented by tourists. There has been a twofold focus of such research:

- tourists as victims of crime
- the cause of death of overseas visitors.

There is a lack of Australian research examining homicide-related deaths among tourists. A similar observation has been made of criminological research on the relationship between tourism and crime in general (Pelfrey 1998).

One of the first studies in this area examined the deaths of 1,513 overseas visitors in Australia between 1997 and 2000 and found over three-quarters of the deaths were as a result of natural causes (Wilks, Pendergast & Wood 2002). One in five of the deaths were accidents, with motor vehicle and water related deaths accounting for the majority of deaths in this category. There were a total of 15 deaths attributable to homicide identified in the study. Twelve of those were from a single incident, which occurred in Queensland on 23 June 2000, dubbed the Childers Backpacker Fire. Overall, homicide accounted for only one percent of deaths of overseas visitors during the four-year period.

In 1997 the Australian Bureau of Tourism Research conducted a survey of international visitors on behalf of the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (Allen 1999). Nearly 98 percent

of those surveyed said they had not experienced any form of harassment or crime. Very few overseas visitors surveyed (.05%; n=14) had experienced an assault or robbery, or a threat of assault or robbery.

While there is limited research in Australia, overseas research has found tourists to be disproportionately victims of crime (Chesney-Lind & Lind 1986). Some of these studies examined the effect of serious violent crime on tourism, although the results appear contradictory. For example, a study in the city of Las Vegas between 1982 and 1993 found there was no significant correlation between the volume of any of the four serious violent crimes (murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault) and the number of visitors to Las Vegas (Pelfrey 1998).

In contrast, another study found that, as Atlanta became one of the main tourist locations in the United States in the 1960s and its tourism population increased, so too did its homicide rate, which tripled in the same decade. In fact, Atlanta was declared 'Murder City' by the media in 1973 with headlines that included *Tidal wave of murder*. Although the study did not identify whether the murders were related to overseas or local visitors or whether they involved local residents, the Atlanta Police formed special squads to combat general crime against tourists (Newman 2000).

In a review of 300 cases of crimes and violence that occurred at tourist destinations around the world during the 1990s, two factors were found to affect the image of the destination and tourism: acts resulting in bodily harm or loss of life; and the frequency of these acts (Pizam 1999).

The hypothesis that crime and tourism are inexorably linked does not appear to apply to the offence of murder. A 23-year study in Hawaii found the number of tourists present in the community was significantly related to the rates of most major crimes with the exception of murder (Chesney-Lind, Lind & Schaafsma 1983).

Latin America, a burgeoning tourist destination with an unparalleled reputation for violence, provides an interesting case study. In Mexico City, an average of 20 tourists are victims of crime daily. The most common offences relate to assaults and thefts. In Sao Paolo, police respond to up to 150 shootings a day and 70 homicides each weekend but despite this violence, the region attracted almost 41 million tourists in 1999, earning it nearly \$24 billion in revenue (Strizzi & Meis 2001).

In other locations, violence has had a detrimental effect on tourism. The murder of ten foreign tourists in Florida in a thirteen-month period during the early 1990s was reported to have had deleterious effects on the state's \$31 billion tourist industry. It was reported that reservations from German and British tourists alone declined 50 percent with tourism in general being down some five percent. The leading cause for the decline was cited as 'concern for safety' (Pelfrey 1998).

In countries such as Egypt, Israel, Turkey, Sri Lanka and India, political motives are often behind the murder of overseas visitors. By damaging the country's tourism industry, its main source of foreign exchange currency, those perpetrating the violence manage to impair the national economy and political establishment (Pizam 1999).

The literature indicates that serious crimes of violence, in particular murder, can cause significant declines in tourism demands, at least in the short term (Pizam & Mansfeld 1996; Shiebler, Crotts & Hollinger 1996).

### The victimisation of tourists: easy targets?

Criminological theory, in particular routine activities theory, postulates that for a crime to occur there needs to be a convergence of motivated offenders, suitable targets, opportunity and an absence of effective guardianship (Clarke & Felson 1993). It has been suggested that overseas visitors have certain personal and behavioural characteristics

which may increase their risk of victimisation, especially of crimes of a predatory nature, such as a robbery (Chesney-Lind & Lind 1986). Research has found that tourists may be targeted because they may carry large sums of money or valuable items such as cameras (Chesney-Lind & Lind 1986). Similarly, tourists may be more likely to engage in behaviour that increases their risk of victimisation, such as frequenting nightclubs or bars at late hours, or travelling to areas that may be considered unsafe. Language barriers may increase the risk.

### Is Australia a safe place to visit?

Safety, tranquillity and peace are considered necessary conditions for prosperous tourism (Pizam & Mansfield 1996). Most research indicates that the majority of people will avoid areas where their safety or wellbeing may be in jeopardy. In this regard, Australia's reputation as a safe destination for overseas visitors is robust. There are many reasons for this, including:

- relative freedom from many of the health risks associated with viral, bacterial and parasitic illnesses
- effectiveness of public security in Australia (Grabosky 1998)
- political stability, and freedom from civil disorder and unrest
- geographically, a country relatively free from natural disasters such as earthquakes.

Despite a handful of extraordinary, high profile homicides, Australia is still perceived to be a safe place to visit. A 1994 survey in the United Kingdom found only two percent of respondents considered Australia as an unsafe destination. However, respondents to the same survey considered visiting New York City to be more than twenty times more dangerous than visiting Australia (Allen 1999). Overall, Australia is considered to be a safe destination for overseas visitors, and has been suggested as a safety benchmark for other tourist destinations (Wilks, Pendergast & Wood 2002).

Given the limited Australian research, specifically in relation to the homicide of tourists in Australia, the present study represents the first national study into the murder of overseas visitors in Australia. It sought to quantify the level of risk experienced by tourists visiting Australia, as well as Australians murdered overseas.

**Methodology**

The only national data source to collect in-depth information on homicide is the National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP), which contains details of all homicide incidents known to police since the early 1990s. This data source was used for the current research, and was supplemented and cross-referenced with two additional sources:

- state and territory homicide squads/ major crime branches
- Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA; now Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs) movement records database.

If a victim was classified as a tourist in the NHMP database, this was cross-referenced with information from DIMIA to determine whether the victim held an overseas visitor visa (as defined earlier). The information from DIMIA was only available from 1994 onwards, so this study examines the murder of overseas visitors in Australia between 1 July 1994 and 30 June 2003.

Additional information on Australians murdered overseas was sourced from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Consular Management Information System, CMIS).

**Murder of overseas visitors to Australia**

In the nine-year period from 1 July 1994 to 30 June 2003 there were 34 overseas visitors murdered in Australia in 20 separate incidents (Table 1). Four New Zealanders who were also murdered in this time period are not included in the study as they did not fall within the definition of visitor. The Port Arthur

(Tasmania) and Childers Backpacker Hostel (Queensland) murders accounted for the murder of 14 overseas visitors (41%). In all but two incidents police apprehended an offender. While the incidents resulted in the deaths of tourists, without interviewing the offenders it is difficult to determine whether tourists were specifically targeted by the offenders.

Yearly fluctuations occurred in the number of overseas visitors murdered in Australia, with the highest number of victims killed in 1999–2000. This was due to a single incident, the Childers backpacker murders on 22 June 2000. The highest number of incidents in a single year, six, occurred in 1996–97. These murders occurred in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria.

During the nine-year period, there were about 40 million short-term visitors to Australia (ABS 2006b). In terms of level of risk of homicide victimisation faced by overseas visitors, the data suggest that overseas tourists were murdered at a rate of 0.9 per million short-term visitors to Australia. In general, Australia’s homicide rate is relatively low compared with other westernised countries such as Canada and the United States. In 2002–03, the rate of homicide was 16 per million Australians.

Visitors from 14 different countries were the victims of murder in Australia during the review period. Table 3 shows that

over a third of the overseas visitors originated from England and Wales (35%). A further 18 percent originated from Japan and Korea. Table 3 also shows the rate of homicide victimisation based on the number of short-term visitors from each country to Australia. While the rates may seem high for some countries, it is important to note the numbers are actually quite low.

Over half of the incidents occurred in a location other than the victim’s place of residence while in Australia (53%). This is a higher proportion compared with homicide in general where 42 percent of victims were killed in a non-residential location (Mouzos & Segrave 2004).

Almost three-quarters of incidents occurred during the late evening or early hours of the morning (6 pm to 6 am; 71%). Information was not available for all incidents, but at least three incidents occurred during the course of another crime (robbery and arson).

In terms of the victim characteristics, 59 percent of tourists murdered were males, and 41 percent were females. A higher proportion of female tourists were victimised than for homicide in general, where 33 percent of victims were female (Mouzos & Segrave 2004). Over three-quarters of the victims were aged between 18 and 30 years.

As a result of the Childers incident, the most common weapon/method used

**Table 1: Number of overseas visitors murdered in Australia, by jurisdiction, 1994–2003**

	Qld	NSW	Vic	Tas	SA	NT	ACT	WA	Australia
Incidents	4	10	2	2	1	1	0	0	20
Victims	15	12	2	3	1	1	0	0	34

Sources: AIC, NHMP 1994–2003 [computer file]; DIMIA Movement records database

**Table 2: Number of overseas visitors murdered in Australia, by year, 1994–2003**

	1994–95	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–00	2000–01	2001–02	2002–03
Incidents	1	2	6	1	1	1	2	4	2
Victims	1	3	8	1	1	12	2	4	2

Sources: AIC, NHMP 1994–2003 [computer file]; DIMIA Movement records database

**Table 3: Country from which visa was obtained by overseas visitors murdered in Australia, 1994–2003**

Country	Number	Rate <sup>(a)</sup>
United Kingdom	12	2.7
Japan	3	0.4
Korea	3	2.0
Fiji	2	9.9
Holland	2	4.7
Ireland	2	6.4
Malaysia	2	1.6
South Korea	2	1.3
Czech Republic	1	NA
Hong Kong	1	0.8
India	1	3.4
Indonesia	1	1.0
Italy	1	2.5
Russia	1	30.7

(a) Rate per million short-term visitor arrivals

Note: High rates may be due to a small number of visitors from that country

Sources: DIMIA Movement records database; ABS (2006b)

to kill the victims was fire (arson; 45%), followed by a knife or sharp instrument (24%), assaultive force (hands or feet; 15%) or a firearm (9%). An examination of homicide in general (Mouzos & Segrave 2004) indicates a knife or sharp instrument as the most common type of weapon used to kill in Australia, accounting for 29 percent of victims, followed by assaultive force (21%), and a firearm (16%).

### Australians murdered overseas

While the rate of overseas tourists being murdered in Australia is quite low, during a similar period (1995 to 2003), there were a total of 158 Australians murdered in 32 overseas countries (Table 4). This equates to a homicide victimisation rate of 5.7 per million Australian short-term visitors overseas. This indicates that the overall risk of homicide victimisation is higher for Australians visiting overseas than for overseas tourists visiting Australia. It is also important to note

that some of the countries visited by Australians have a higher homicide rate than Australia, indicating an overall higher likelihood of victimisation in those countries than in Australia.

Australians murdered in Indonesia accounted for over half of all Australians murdered overseas (57%), as well as the highest homicide victimisation rate of all destination countries by Australians (see Table 4). This includes the 88 Australians murdered in the Bali bombing during 2002. The United States accounted for a further 10 percent of victims (n=15), including 10 Australians killed in the World Trade Centre terrorist attacks in 2001.

There is debate as to whether deaths from acts of terrorism should be classified as homicides or deaths from war operations (see Blackman 2003, 2002; Cheatwood 2002; Weaver & Wittekind 2002 for a discussion). If the number of Australians murdered in an act of terrorism overseas (Bali bombing and World Trade Center) were excluded from the figures, the total number of Australians murdered overseas would be 59, which is almost twice the number of overseas tourists murdered in Australia.

### Implications

There is no evidence indicating that overseas visitors are the specific targets of murder in Australia. It can be said with reasonable conviction that the murder of overseas visitors in Australia is a statistically rare event.

There is no doubt that in recent times there has been a growing appreciation of and even concern about tourist health and safety issues. As a result, most tourists now understandably make conscious decisions to avoid destinations troubled by the threat of serious crime such as terrorism and murder (World Tourism Organisation 2002).

This study has provided a general overview of the situation as it applies in Australia, highlighting the low risk of homicide of tourists who visit Australia. The study has highlighted the fact

**Table 4: Number and rate<sup>(a)</sup> of Australian visitors murdered overseas, 1995–2003**

Country	Number	Rate <sup>(a)</sup>
Indonesia	90	37.2
United States	15	5.1
Thailand	7	6.4
Papua New Guinea	6	17.8
Philippines	4	7.8
Lebanon	3	17.8
Other Southern/ Eastern Europe (Russian Federation)	3	8.8
Greece	2	0.5
United Kingdom	2	0.7
Singapore	2	1.8
Other Oceania (Solomon Islands)	2	24.7
Sri Lanka	2	16.9
Other Americas (Peru)	1	1.0
Other Southern and Central Asia (Afghanistan)	1	14.9
Serbia and Montenegro	1	20.0
Chile	1	19.6
East Timor	1	21.7
France	1	2.8
Japan	1	1.9
Other South East Asia (Lao PDR)	1	15.1
New Caledonia	1	7.4
Cambodia	1	24.8
India	1	2.8
Malaysia	1	1.0
New Zealand	1	0.2
Tonga	1	24.1
Poland	1	14.9
Vietnam	1	2.1
Other sub-Saharan Africa (Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Tanzania, Zambia)	4	31.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>5.7</b>

(a) Rate per million departures by Australian residents to specific countries

Note: High rates may be due to a small number of Australians visiting that country

Sources: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade CMIS, 1995–2003; ABS (2006b)

that tourists most at risk of homicide victimisation are young males. This finding is not surprising given that most homicides involve young males, usually as a result of a spontaneous over-reaction to a conflict situation. Alcohol tends to fuel such situations.

Those who have examined the issue of crimes against tourists suggest a number of general considerations for effective strategies to address the issue. These strategies include the establishment of partnerships between the police and the tourism industry to identify and address crime-related concerns, and training police and private security staff to recognise and address tourist-related safety concerns. Education is also a key strategy to inform tourists of ways in which they can reduce their risk of victimisation (Glensor & Peak 2004).

Findings from the current study should assist in providing an accurate portrait of risk to overseas visitors. Current efforts to identify and manage emerging threats from terrorism can only add to protecting the valuable Australian overseas visitor market.

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