

203726

---

**HOMICIDES IN AUSTRALIA 1990-91**

---

Homicides in Australia series  
ISSN 1038-6912

*Homicides in Australia 1989-90*  
Heather Strang

The National Homicide Monitoring Program, which produces the Homicides in Australia series, was established following a recommendation by the National Committee on Violence (NCV) in its final report, *Violence: Directions for Australia*. The NCV was in existence from October 1988 to December 1989, and earlier monographs produced were:

*Violence in Australia*

*Victims of Violence*  
P.N. Grabosky

*Society's Reponse to the Violent Offender*  
P.N. Grabosky & W.E. Lucas

# **HOMICIDES IN AUSTRALIA 1990-91**

Heather Strang



Australian Institute of Criminology

© Australian Institute of Criminology  
October 1992  
The Criminology Building  
4 Marcus Clarke Street  
Canberra ACT

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Inquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 0 642 18279 5  
ISSN 1038-6912

Typeset by Trendsetting Pty Ltd.  
Printed by Better Printing,  
1 Foster St, Queanbeyan NSW 2620

# **Contents**

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES	vii
PREFACE	ix
THE 1990-91 DATA IN BRIEF	xi
Salient features of homicide	xi
INTRODUCTION	1
DEFINING HOMICIDE INCIDENTS	3
THE DATA	5
CAVEATS ON THE DATA	7
THE INCIDENT	9
Jurisdiction	9
Geographic area	9
Location	10
Time of day/day of week	10
Drug involvement	10
Precipitating factors	12
Weapon/method	14
THE VICTIM	21
Sex and age	21
Marital status	24
Employment	24
Country of birth	24
Racial appearance	25
Alcohol/drug use	26
Criminal history	27
THE OFFENDER	29
Sex and age	29
Marital status	29
Employment	31
Country of birth	31
Racial appearance	31
Alcohol/drug use	33

---

Criminal history	34
Murder-suicide	34
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VICTIM AND OFFENDER	35
SUMMARY	39

---

## List of Tables and Figures

Table 1	Homicide: Sex of Victim by Jurisdiction— Number and Rate per 100,000 Population, Australia 1990-91	11
Table 2	Homicide: Sex of Offender by Jurisdiction— Number and Rate per 100,000 Population, Australia 1990-91	11
Table 3	Homicide: Jurisdiction of Incident by Primary Weapon/Method, Australia 1990-91	16
Table 4	Homicide: Geographical Location of Incident by Primary Weapon/Method, Australia 1990-91	18
Table 5	Homicide: Primary Weapon/Method Used by Primary Precipitating Factor, Australia 1990-91	19
Table 6	Homicide: Age of Victims by Sex—Number and Rate per 100,000 Age Specific Population, Australia 1990-91	22
Table 7	Homicide: Racial Appearance of Victim by Jurisdiction, Australia 1990-91	25
Table 8	Homicide: Racial Appearance of Victim and Offender Pairs, Australia 1990-91	26
Table 9	Homicide: Age of Offender by Sex, Number and Rate per 100,000 Age Specific Population, Australia 1990-91	30
Table 10	Homicide: Racial Appearance of Offenders by Jurisdiction, Australia 1990-91	33
Table 11	Homicide: Victim Jurisdiction by Primary Relationship, Australia 1990-91	36
Table 12	Homicide: Racial Appearance of Victim by Relationship, Australia 1990-91	37
Figure 1	Primary Precipitating Factors in Homicide, Australia 1990-91	12
Figure 2	Homicide: Primary Method/Weapon, Australia 1990-91	14
Figure 3	Homicide: Age of Victims by Sex, Australia 1990-91	21
Figure 4	Homicide: Jurisdiction and Sex of Victims, Australia 1990-91	23
Figure 5	Homicide: Age of Offenders, Australia 1990-91	31
Figure 6	Homicide: Jurisdiction and Sex of Offenders, Australia 1990-91	32
Figure 7	Homicide: Relationship between Victims and Offenders, Australia 1990-91	35

---

## Preface

This report is the second in the series produced by the Australian Institute of Criminology's National Homicide Monitoring Program. This Program forms part of the Institute's ongoing violence monitoring activities which flow from the recommendations of the National Committee on Violence.

In its report, *Violence: Directions for Australia*, the Committee observed that systematic information collection and analysis about this—the most extreme form of violence—was desirable not only to provide basic public understanding about the question of homicide risk, but also to serve as a rational foundation on which to base public policy in areas as diverse as child protection and firearms regulation. Only through understanding as much as we can about the circumstances in which homicides occur, and the characteristics of those involved in them, can effective prevention and control strategies be devised.

The AIC has received an enormous amount of cooperation from police in every jurisdiction in undertaking this Program: it would not have been feasible without their close collaboration. The response by police and others to the publication of the first report in this series last year has been very gratifying and has encouraged us to contemplate ways in which the Program might be expanded or used as a model for the analysis of other categories of offence on an Australia-wide basis.

Options which are presently being considered include the extension of the National Homicide Monitoring Program to include data on the court disposition of these homicide cases: it would be valuable to observe and comment upon, for example, the process of attrition which results in a substantial minority of these cases not coming to trial at all, as well as examining the outcomes of those cases which do proceed to trial.

Another option being examined at the present time is the extension of monitoring to other offence categories such as armed robbery and serious assault. There are problems in undertaking Australia-wide studies of these offences because of the variation in definition between jurisdictions, although it is hoped that the work of the Australian Bureau of Statistics' National Crime Statistics Unit will make substantial progress in the resolution of these difficulties. It may be possible in the near future to modify the model of the National Homicide



---

Monitoring Program so as to gather useful information in these areas, although, given the volume of such offences and the consequent resource allocation which would be entailed, the firm support of criminal justice agencies, and especially police forces in each jurisdiction, would be vital.

The AIC's role as Australia's national crime research organisation is a unique one: only a national agency can undertake studies of Australia-wide relevance. The Program whose report is presented here continues the AIC's tradition of providing high quality, policy-relevant research on issues in crime and crime prevention to agencies throughout Australia.

**Duncan Chappell**

Director

Australian Institute of Criminology

---

# The 1990-91 Data in Brief

**Salient features of homicide.** Homicide in Australia in 1990-91 was characterised by the following salient features:

- The homicide rate increased slightly from 1.9 per 100,000 population in 1989-90 to 2.1 in 1990-91. This represents an increase from 330 victims in 1989-90 to 351 in 1990-91.
- The proportion of male victims to female victims was about 3:2. The proportion of male offenders to female offenders was 9:1.
- Aboriginal people were vastly over-represented amongst both homicide victims and offenders. For victims the rate was more than eight times, and for offenders more than 14 times that for Australia as a whole.
- Homicide remained overwhelmingly intra-racial in character and no incidents this year appeared to be racially motivated.
- Firearms were used in just under one-quarter of incidents: knives and assaults (including attacks with blunt instruments and strangulation as well as beatings) were the most common methods used.
- Around 40 per cent of homicides where *the relationship was recorded* were between intimates, both spousal and other family members: about two-thirds of these domestic homicides were between spouses.
- A further one-quarter of homicides where *the relationship was recorded* occurred between friends: most of these were young males and many of the incidents resulted from trivial drunken altercations.
- The incidence of stranger homicide remained low and there was no indication of serial offending.

---

# Introduction

This report describes and analyses the characteristics of homicide incidents which occurred between July 1990 and June 1991, and the victims and offenders involved in them. Information on these incidents was collected under the auspices of the Australian Institute of Criminology's National Homicide Monitoring Program, which reports on an annual basis.

The aim of this Program is to provide reliable information on the nature of Australian homicide, and to permit over time the detection of patterns and trends.

In addition it is intended that, based on these data and the knowledge they generate, it may be possible to undertake special analysis of particular aspects of homicide: for example, it is useful to investigate whether particular segments of society such as young children, the aged, ethnic or racial groups, are especially vulnerable, and, if so, in what circumstances. It can also be used to discover, for example, the circumstances in which particular weapons are used, and whether the greater availability of firearms in rural areas affects the character of homicide in those districts.

These and many more questions about the character of Australian homicide can be answered over time. However, it is important not to make hasty conclusions on the basis of inadequate information. Homicide remains a relatively rare phenomenon in our society and, as such, is subject to random fluctuations associated with infrequent events. Where this year's findings coincide with those of last year, as they do for example in weapon usage, then we may express some confidence that the findings are a true reflection of the real world. Where this year's findings depart from last year's—for example in the greater or lesser incidence of homicides in particular jurisdictions—it would be misleading to assume that the data indicate a particular trend. It will be necessary to await at least a third year's data before confident statements can be made about trends in any aspect of Australian homicide.



---

# Defining Homicide Incidents

**F**or the purposes of the Program, homicide incidents include:

- all cases, excluding driving-related offences, resulting in a person or persons being charged with murder or manslaughter (including special offences such as infanticide or dangerous act causing death, which apply in some jurisdictions);
- all murder-suicides classed as murder by the police; and
- all other deaths classed by the police as homicides, even though no suspect has been apprehended.

It is important to note those incidents which are not included in this definition: for example, attempted murder is excluded, as are other violent deaths such as industrial accidents involving criminal negligence (unless a charge of manslaughter is laid). Lawful homicide, including incidents involving police and others in the course of their duties, is also excluded.



---

## The Data

The source for these data is once again police records in each jurisdiction, supplemented as necessary with information supplied by individual investigating police officers. Again, police in every jurisdiction have been extraordinarily helpful, not only in making their records available, but also assisting directly in the data collection process wherever possible.

Detailed information has been collected on each homicide reported to police during the 1990-91 fiscal year, and each victim and offender (where known) involved in these incidents. The intention, as was the case last year, is to identify as precisely as possible the characteristics of individuals which place them at particular risk of homicide victimisation and of homicide offending, and the circumstances which enhance the likelihood of a homicide occurring.

A special note is required concerning information relating to what is referred to as the 'racial appearance' of victims and offenders. We are aware of the shortcomings of this term and of the possibility that it may give offence to some. We are also aware that there are special considerations surrounding Aboriginality which make the concept of 'racial appearance' inappropriate. In addition, we are reliant on police data for this as for all other information, and errors and inconsistencies in such a sensitive area are likely to occur. Nevertheless, we believe that important information is captured here which adds substantively to the picture of Australian homicide.

The Australian Institute of Criminology, like all Commonwealth instrumentalities, is bound by the provisions of the *Privacy Act 1988*, which places restrictions on the disclosure of personal information which could result in the identification of individuals.

In this context it should be noted that in the Australian Capital Territory one incident occurred in 1990-91 which involved three victims and one offender. Because of the inevitability of identifying aspects of these individuals if ACT data were shown separately, in tables and figures with jurisdictional breakdowns this case has been counted in with New South Wales data (but comments in the text concerning New South Wales data relate to New South Wales data alone).

Information concerning 323 incidents was collected, involving 351 victims and 338 offenders (in this report, the term

---

'offender' is used to include not only those convicted but also those suspected of or charged with the offence). In 45 incidents no suspects had been identified at the time of data collection, although some may well have been identified subsequently. As would be expected, around 90 per cent of homicides became known to the police within twenty-four hours of the incident.



---

## Caveats on the Data

Once again it is necessary to warn of inadequacies in these data and to reiterate some of the caveats expressed in relation to the 1989-90 study. These stem partly from difficulties involved in adapting to this Program record-keeping practices designed for the demands of the criminal justice system, with emphases and attention given to aspects of the incident of greater relevance to the prosecution process than to a sociological study of events. Thus, for example, there is a tendency for information about the offender in police records to be more detailed than that concerning the victim, and the nature of the relationship between them is often not recorded in any degree of detail (or at all).

There are special problems relating to information about the offender, who may only be a suspect at the time data were collected. Even if the prosecution process proceeds, the suspect may be no-billed, discharged at committal, found not guilty or convicted of a lesser offence. Nevertheless, a useful distinction can be made between legal guilt and the 'social reality' of homicide offending: for the purposes of this Program, it is not guilt before the law which is of primary interest or relevance. It is assumed at this stage of this ongoing study that those identified by the police as the offender were in actuality involved in the homicide: it will be necessary ultimately to test this assumption against court findings.

In addition, it must be acknowledged that there are inevitable limitations resulting from the use of police data as the only source of information, as they represent only one perspective of events. Homicide is frequently a complex social interaction which requires all avenues of the criminal justice process to be exhausted, incorporating the different emphases of the coronial inquiry and the trial process itself, before the full picture of the event emerges. Indeed, some would maintain that 'truth' remains elusive even then.

Finally, it must be recognised that the data set is inevitably incomplete, as presumably homicides do take place from time to time which for a variety of reasons are not discovered. There may be incidents in which the actual cause of death escapes detection; in addition, an unknown number of persons reported missing each year may have been victims of foul play.

However, it is gratifying to report that the quality of the data for this year has improved greatly over last year, especially

---

for New South Wales, for which special thanks are due to the New South Wales Police Tactical Intelligence Section. With the help of police in all jurisdictions, a number of data collection problems have been resolved. This improvement leads to an increased level of confidence about the reliability and validity of the findings. The police themselves are, of course, the first to warn of inadequacies in their records, but awareness of their limitations is the first step to amelioration. The Australian Institute of Criminology is increasingly confident of the reliability of the findings based on these records.

---

## The Incident

**H**omicides do not occur randomly across time and space: certain places, times and circumstances are associated with an enhanced risk of fatal incidents occurring. A number of aspects of these incidents have therefore been examined so as to identify such places, times and circumstances.

**Jurisdiction.** The rate of homicide victimisation across Australia remained fairly uniform at around two per 100,000 of the population, with the exception of the Northern Territory, where it was more than eight times that for the rest of Australia (see Table 1).

There was some variation between jurisdictions in the number of victims for this year against last year: there was an Australia-wide increase of 6 per cent in the number of victims (from 330 to 351), but in New South Wales there was a 26 per cent increase (from 104 to 131) and in the Northern Territory a 35 per cent increase (from 20 to 27). All other jurisdictions remained stable, and in several cases actually declined.

Similarly, the rate of offending was again uniform across Australia, with the exception of the Northern Territory. There were 323 incidents in the 1990-91 period.

Australia-wide, 304 incidents (94 per cent) involved only one victim: a further 13 incidents involved two victims, 4 involved three victims, 1 involved four victims and 1 involved five victims. The pattern was similar in each jurisdiction. Of the 278 incidents where the offender was identified, 239 (86 per cent) were known to involve only one offender, 29 involved two offenders, 6 involved three offenders, 3 involved four offenders and 1 involved eleven offenders: there was no identified offender in 45 cases. Ninety per cent of identified offenders were male (see Table 2).

**Geographic area.** Generally speaking, the distribution of homicides coincides very closely with population distribution: a little less than 60 per cent of Australians live in or near the major metropolitan cities, together with the centres of Newcastle, Wollongong and Geelong. Five per cent of homicides in 1990-91 occurred in the inner areas of these cities and 52 per cent in their suburbs. There were some jurisdictional differences to this overall pattern: in Victoria over 70 per cent

---

of incidents occurred within the Melbourne metropolitan area (including Geelong) and in South Australia 85 per cent occurred in Adelaide; by contrast, in Western Australia and the Northern Territory only one-third of incidents occurred in the major centres of population.

Major regional centres, such as Townsville or Ballarat, together with country towns accounted for a further 27 per cent of incidents. Six per cent of homicides occurred within Aboriginal communities and fringe camps, the majority of these being in the Northern Territory: this was a slightly lower proportion than last year, but the actual numbers of Aboriginal victims and offenders have increased.

**Location.** Again this year, almost 60 per cent of incidents occurred within residential premises, three-quarters of these being the victims' home, and about one-quarter of victims were cohabiting with the offender at the time of the incident. A higher proportion of women than men were killed in their own homes: 57 per cent against 38 per cent. Fifteen per cent occurred in streets or car parks, mostly in suburban locations. Again, public spaces such as shops, shopping malls, sporting venues, public transport and its environs, taxis and other vehicles, parks and beaches accounted for fewer than 10 per cent of all incidents. Most of the remainder occurred in bushland (9 per cent).

**Time of day/day of week.** Half of all incidents occurred on Friday, Saturday or Sunday, most of Sunday's occurring in the early hours of the morning. This pattern was similar across all jurisdictions. About 40 per cent occurred between six in the evening and midnight, and a further 30 per cent between midnight and six in the morning.

**Drug involvement.** Information available relating to the involvement of illicit drugs in homicide is not necessarily complete: anecdotal evidence of police officers suggests that it is very much higher than records indicate. In only 5 per cent of all homicide incidents were illicit drugs definitely involved and most of these occurred in the Melbourne and Sydney metropolitan areas: they usually related either to disputes over dealing, getting money for drugs or acquiring drugs for personal use.

It is quite possible that a number of the robbery-related homicides also were drug-related—indeed that illicit drugs

**Table 1: Homicide: Sex of Victim by Jurisdiction—Number and Rate per 100,000 Population, Australia 1990-91**

Sex of Victim	Jurisdiction																		
	NSW		VIC.		QLD		WA		SA		TAS.		NT		ACT		AUST.		
	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	%
Male	77	(2.7)	42	(2.0)	40	(2.9)	15	(1.9)	13	(1.8)	2	(0.9)	15	(18.3)	0	(0.0)	204	(2.4)	58%
Female	54	(1.9)	35	(1.6)	20	(1.4)	8	(1.0)	12	(1.7)	3	(1.3)	12	(16.2)	3	(2.2)	147	(1.7)	42%
Total	131	(2.3)	77	(1.8)	60	(2.1)	23	(1.4)	25	(1.8)	5	(1.1)	27	(17.3)	3	(1.1)	351	(2.1)	100%
Victims	37%		22%		17%		7%		7%		1%		8%		1%		100%		

**Table 2: Homicide: Sex of Offender by Jurisdiction—Number and Rate per 100,000 Population, Australia 1990-91**

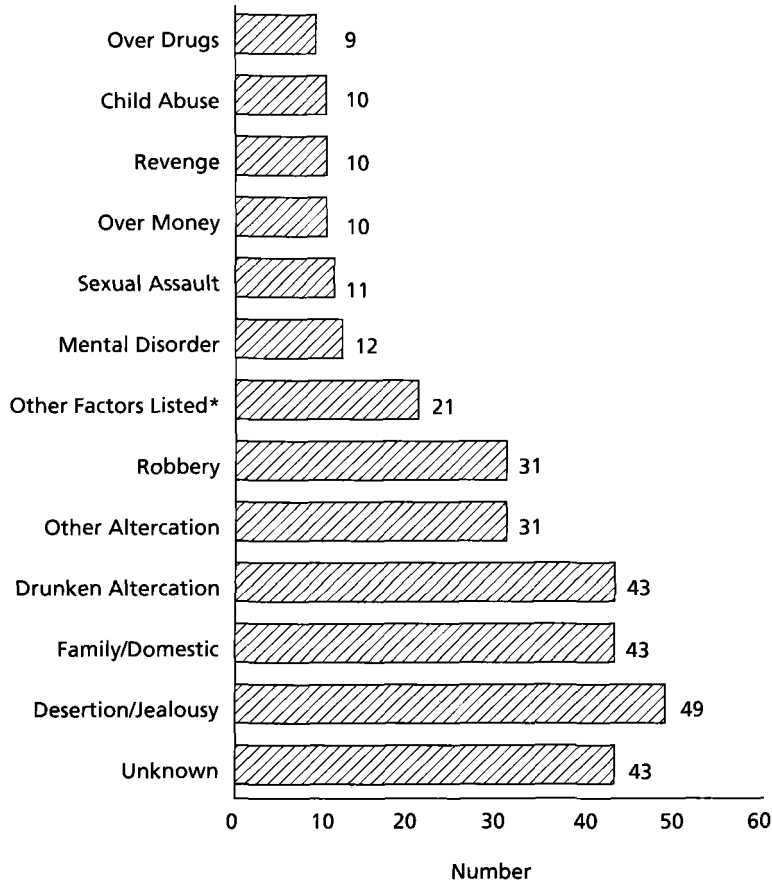
Sex of Offender	Jurisdiction																		
	NSW		VIC.		QLD		WA		SA		TAS.		NT		ACT		AUST.*		
	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	No.	Rate	%
Male	97	(3.4)	68	(3.2)	57	(4.0)	20	(2.5)	17	(2.4)	5	(2.2)	40	(48.8)	1	(0.7)	305	(3.6)	90%
Female	13	(0.5)	6	(0.3)	3	(0.2)	2	(0.3)	6	(0.8)	0	(0.0)	3	(4.1)	0	(0.0)	33	(0.4)	10%
Total	110	(1.9)	74	(1.7)	60	(2.1)	22	(1.4)	23	(1.6)	5	(1.1)	43	(27.4)	1	(0.4)	338	(2.0)	100%
Offenders	33%		22%		18%		6%		6%		1%		13%		1%		100%		

\*There were 45 incidents in which no offender was identified.

were involved in a number of other incidents as well—but no information was available.

**Precipitating factors.** Figure 1 indicates the most common factors precipitating homicide incidents.

**Figure 1: Primary Precipitating Factors in Homicide, Australia 1990-91**



- \* Homosexual 'hate' - 3
- Carelessness - 4
- Suicide pact - 4
- Intellectual disability - 1
- Other factors not involving an altercation - 9

---

Particular caution is needed in interpreting these data: homicide almost always involves a dynamic social interaction between victim and offender and a great many contributing factors relating both to the participants' backgrounds and the immediate circumstances. Police data alone are often inadequate in describing the complexities of these factors and the nature of that dynamic interaction, because the investigative process has other priorities.

In addition, it is important to note that trivial altercations occur between people standing in all kinds of relationships to each other: frequently spousal couples, other family members, friends, acquaintances, even strangers, engage in the same kind of apparently petty, inconsequential arguments which escalate to a fatal incident. The relationship between victim and offender therefore is frequently a more telling variable than the nature of the precipitating altercation, in terms of interpreting the nature of the event.

Incidents involving intimates and relating to the breakdown of their relationships, again account for close to one-third of all homicides in 1990-91. The largest single category of precipitating factor was that of altercation arising from jealousy or the termination of a sexual relationship, or the threat to do so (15 per cent). Domestic disputes between spouses or other family members accounted for a further 13 per cent of incidents: it was usually impossible to determine from available information whether these incidents were the last in a series of ongoing violent altercations or whether they were one-off events precipitated by factors found in disputes between people in non-intimate relationships. It is important, therefore, to assess the significance of these figures in conjunction with the data regarding relationship.

The next largest category of precipitating factor relates to altercations which escalate from verbal argument to physical violence and finally to death (23 per cent): more than half of these (13 per cent) involved drunken interchanges over trivial matters, almost always between young male peers.

Overall, the pattern of precipitating factors in 1990-91 looked similar to that for 1989-90: the exception was the increase in the number of incidents where the motive appeared to be robbery. This year there were 31 such fatal incidents compared with six last year, and over half of these occurred in New South Wales. However, it is not possible to conclude from two years' data alone whether this represents a significant upward trend in fatal robberies.

It is interesting to reflect on those factors which do not appear frequently to result in homicides. There were relatively few incidents where the offender's mental disorder or intellectual disability was a factor. Homicide resulting from a sexual assault remained quite uncommon in Australia as a whole (seven of the eleven incidents occurred in New South Wales). There was a very low incidence of gang-related homicides in Australia. As well, contract killings resulting from activities associated with organised crime appear to be at a low level (though they may be more difficult to detect than other homicides and hence under-reported). Finally, there was no indication of serial offending in these data.

**Weapon/method.** Firearms, knives and other sharp instruments and assault (which includes attacks with blunt instruments and strangulation as well as beatings) accounted for over 90 per cent of homicides in 1990-91 (see Figure 2). Where firearms were involved, nearly half of all victims were killed with .22 calibre rifles, and a further one-quarter with shotguns. Handgun killings remained relatively rare with ten victims.

**Figure 2: Homicide: Primary Method/Weapon, Australia 1990-91**

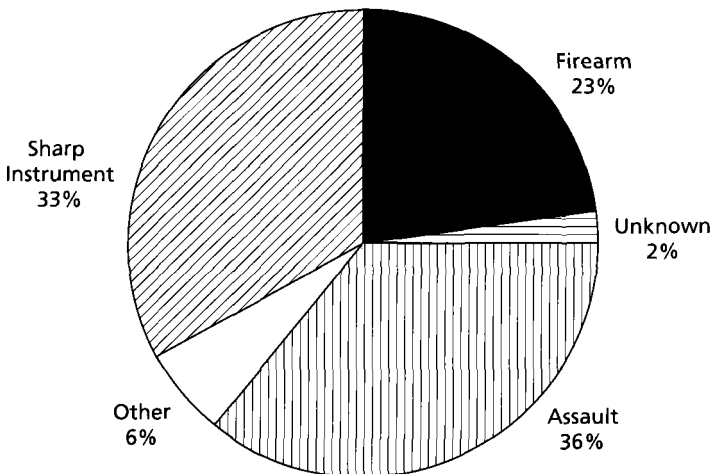


Table 3 shows that the choice of method used for homicide this year was remarkably similar overall to last year's pattern, in spite of fluctuations within jurisdictions.



---

In Victoria and Queensland in 1990-91 there was a marked drop in the use of firearms compared with the previous year, and a commensurate increase in knife-related and assault-related deaths respectively. Nearly half of all firearms-related homicides occurred in New South Wales, whilst such homicides remained relatively rare in the Northern Territory: a factor in the Northern Territory was the low incidence of firearms-related homicides amongst Aboriginal people (and a commensurately higher proportion of death from assaults). However, most of these intra-jurisdictional differences can be explained at this stage as the kind of random fluctuations to be expected with relatively rare events.

When we look at the choice of weapon by the sex of the offender, we find that, similar to last year, proportionately twice as many men as women chose firearms: 22 per cent of men and 11 per cent of women. Again around half of all homicides committed by women involved a knife or other sharp instrument. As might be expected, the vast majority of assault homicides (95 per cent) were committed by men.

There were few significant differences between males and females in terms of cause of death this year. There was a slightly higher proportion of males who were the victims of firearms (25 per cent against 18 per cent), and a slightly higher proportion of females who were victims of strangulation (12 per cent against 4 per cent), but other differences were not noteworthy.

Table 4 shows the use of different weapons/methods in different geographical regions. Bearing in mind that around 60 per cent of Australians live in or around the major metropolitan centres, there appears to be a greater propensity to use firearms in country towns and other rural locations—properties and open bushland—than would be expected on the basis of population alone. This was in spite of the low use of firearms in incidents involving Aboriginal victims, most of whom resided outside metropolitan areas. These figures suggest that the greater availability of firearms in rural Australia was reflected in the choice of weapon in homicides occurring in those locations.

On the basis of Table 5 the following observations can be made:

- when the precipitating factor related to jealousy or termination of the relationship, there was a somewhat higher incidence of firearm involvement than might be anticipated;

**Table 3: Homicide: Jurisdiction of Incident by Primary Weapon/Method, Australia 1990-91**

Primary Weapon/ Method	Jurisdiction of Incident															
	NSW & ACT		VIC.		QLD		WA		SA		TAS.		NT		AUST.	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Firearm	37	28	14	18	10	17	5	22	6	24	3	60	4	15	79	23
Knife etc.	39	29	37	48	17	28	5	22	6	24	1	20	10	37	115	33
Assault	46	34	22	29	24	40	12	52	12	48	1	20	12	44	129	36
Other	9	7	3	4	7	12	1	4	0	0	0	0	1	4	21	6
Unknown	3	2	1	1	2	3	0	0	1	4	0	0	0	0	7	2
<b>Total</b>																
Victims	134	100	77	100	60	100	23	100	25	100	5	100	27	100	351	100

- 
- when the precipitating factor related to a drunken altercation, firearms involvement was very low, whilst assault was very high;
  - for those incidents involving domestic/family disputes, the pattern of weapon usage was little different to the overall pattern, though knives predominate;
  - in fatal robberies, the incidence of firearms usage was low whilst assault was high;
  - nearly three-quarters of fatal sexual homicides resulted from an assault and none involved firearms.

When we consider the choice of weapon/method for different kinds of relationships, the following facts emerge:

- the pattern of firearms usage was spread fairly evenly over different relationships in this year's data, except when the relationship between victim and offender was 'friend/long-term acquaintance' or stranger, where the incidence was low (19 per cent of 'friends' and 17 per cent of strangers). This tends to support the conclusion reached last year, that firearms are little used in spontaneous flare-ups between peers, and that few stranger killings are premeditated to the extent that offenders arm themselves specifically to kill;
- similarly, usage of knives and similar implements was spread quite evenly across most categories of relationship, although they were used more frequently than other means in spousal killings (36 per cent of spousal victims);
- assault was the most common cause of death where the victim and offender were strangers to one another (50 per cent of all stranger homicides) or friends/long-term acquaintances (39 per cent): a high proportion of both such instances were fights between peers.

In general, it would be useful to know the proportion of firearms used in homicides which are registered weapons, whether the offender held a firearms licence, whether the offender owned the weapon or whether it was stolen.

**Table 4: Homicide: Geographical Location of Incident by Primary Weapon/Method, Australia 1990-91**

Geographical Area	Primary Weapon/Method Used										Total	
	Firearm		Sharp Inst.		Assault		Other		Unknown		Victims Australia	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Inner City	1	1	5	4	11	9	0	0	0	0	17	5
Suburban	33	42	74	64	62	48	6	28	2	29	177	50
Regional Centre	10	13	11	10	16	12	2	10	2	29	41	12
Aboriginal Community	0	0	6	5	13	10	0	0	0	0	19	5
Other Rural	15	19	8	7	6	5	10	47	0	0	39	11
Country Town	20	25	9	8	19	15	2	10	3	42	53	15
Unknown	0	0	2	2	2	1	1	5	0	0	5	1
Total	79	100	115	100	129	100	21	100	7	100	351	100
Victims	(23%)		(33%)		(36%)		(6%)		(2%)		(100%)	

**Table 5: Homicide: Primary Weapon/Method Used in Incident by Primary Precipitating Factor, Australia 1990-91**

Primary Precipitating Factor	Primary Weapon/Method Used								Total Victims Australia	
	Firearm		Sharp Inst.		Assault		Other/Unknown			
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Family/Domestic	9	21	16	37	17	40	1	2	43	100%
Desertion/Jealousy	16	29	17	30	17	30	6	11	56	100%
Drunken Altercation - peers	4	9	14	33	23	54	2	4	43	100%
Other Altercation	5	16	14	45	9	29	3	10	31	100%
Robbery	5	16	9	29	16	52	1	3	31	100%
Mental Disorder	7	47	5	33	3	20	0	0	15	100%
Sexual Assault	0	0	2	18	8	73	1	9	11	100%
Over Money	4	36	3	27	4	36	0	0	11	100%
Revenge	4	40	4	40	2	20	0	0	10	100%
Child Abuse	0	0	0	0	9	90	1	10	10	100%
Over Drugs	4	36	7	64	0	0	0	0	11	100%
Other Factors Listed Below*	8	35	1	4	7	30	7	30	23	100%
Unknown	13	23	23	41	14	25	6	11	56	100%
<b>Total</b>	<b>79 (23%)</b>		<b>115 (33%)</b>		<b>129 (36%)</b>		<b>28 (8%)</b>		<b>351</b>	<b>(100%)</b>

\* 'Hate' (racial or homosexual) - 3

Carelessness - 4

Suicide pact - 4

Intellectual Disability - 1

Other factors not involving an altercation - 11

---

This information is needed for a better-informed firearms control policy and to determine the effectiveness of existing controls. It is again suggested that police consider recording this information.

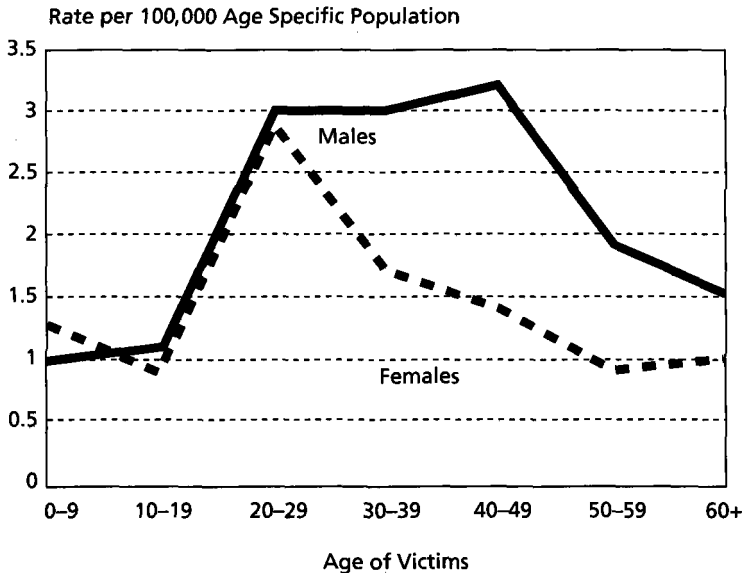
# The Victim

Last year's data revealed that, despite the complexity of homicide as a sociological event, it is possible to observe associations which suggest enhanced risk of both homicide victimisation and offending.

**Sex and age.** The most obvious associations relate to age and sex, as Table 6 reveals.

Again this year, male victims significantly outnumbered females: this was the case for every age group except those under the age of ten, although the differential varied amongst the remaining age groups and was especially apparent for those aged 30-49. Risk diminished steeply thereafter for both men and women, as is shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Homicide: Age of Victims by Sex, Australia 1990-91**



**Table 6: Homicide: Age of Victims by Sex—Number and Rate per 100,000 Age Specific Population, Australia 1990-91**

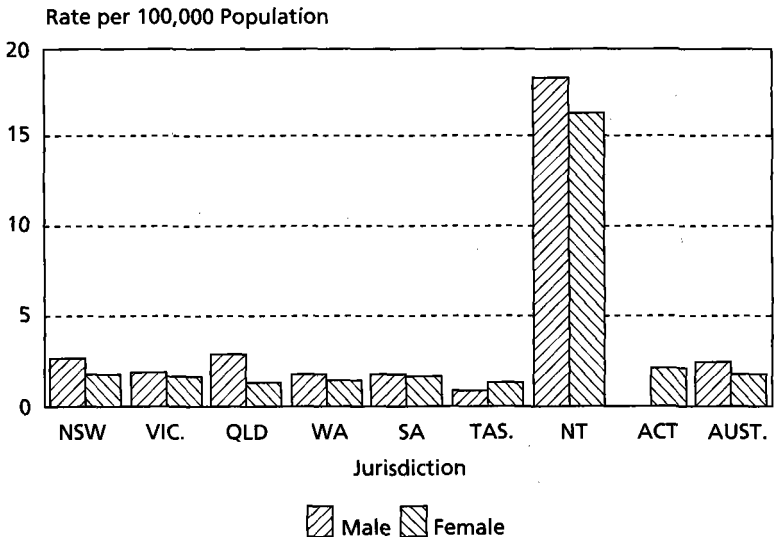
Sex of Victim	Age of Victim											Total
	< 1	1-9	10-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+	Unknown			
Male	3 (2.3)	9 (0.8)	15 (1.1)	42 (3.0)	40 (3.0)	36 (3.2)	15 (1.9)	17 (1.5)	27	204	58%	
Female	6 (4.8)	11 (1.0)	12 (0.9)	41 (2.9)	23 (1.7)	15 (1.4)	7 (0.9)	14 (1.0)	18	147	42%	
Total	9 (3.5) 3%	20 (0.9) 6%	27 (1.0) 7%	83 (3.0) 23%	63 (2.4) 18%	51 (2.4) 15%	22 (1.4) 6%	31 (1.2) 9%	45 13%	351	100%	



In contrast to last year, when there had been more than twice as many men as women victims aged in their twenties, this year there was almost exactly the same number. The difference in this age group this year almost entirely accounts for the overall difference in the proportions of male and female victims (3:2) as against last year (2:1). About half of all female victims were aged under 30 this year, whereas male victims were spread over a much wider range of ages.

There was also a notable increase in the number of victims under the age of ten years (from 20 to 29). These children made up 9 per cent of all victims, compared with 6 per cent last year. Infants aged under one year were at greatest risk of any age group, with a rate of 3.5 per 100,000 (up from 2.8 last year). Again this year, females under one year of age outnumbered males, and their rate per 100,000 of 4.8 was very much higher than any other age group of either sex. Three-quarters of children under the age of ten were killed by their parents or de facto parents.

**Figure 4: Homicide: Jurisdiction and Sex of Victims, Australia 1990-91**



---

Figure 4 shows the rate for both males and females in each jurisdiction. The most salient feature of these data was the exceptionally high level of victimisation in the Northern Territory compared with other jurisdictions for both males and females.

Northern Territory victims also tended to be younger, in line with that jurisdiction's demographic profile: nearly one-half were aged between 20 and 30, compared with one-quarter nationally. However, it was in New South Wales that juveniles appeared to be most vulnerable: over half of all victims under the age of 20 died in New South Wales (30 out of 57). One-quarter of all New South Wales victims were in this age group compared with 16 per cent nationally.

When we look at the sex of victim-offender pairs, it becomes apparent that homicide remains overwhelmingly a male phenomenon. Nearly 60 per cent of all homicides involved both male victims and male offenders; for nearly one-third of all pairs, the victim was female and the offender male. Only 10 per cent of pairs involved a female offender.

**Marital status.** Of those victims for whom marital status was recorded, 60 per cent were single or no longer married. However, a higher proportion of women than men were known to be married or in a de facto relationship—47 per cent as against 35 per cent. These figures indicate that, for males at least, being single may be associated with an enhanced risk of victimisation.

**Employment.** Employment data are not consistently available in police records, especially for victims: it was unknown in one-third of all instances. For those victims for whom it was known, around equal numbers of males were employed and unemployed; twice as many females were unemployed as employed. These figures were very close to last year. Again, very few victims were classified as being in the professional/managerial occupational category.

It would appear that being out of the paid workforce, whether through inability to find work or because of domestic duties, and the resulting lack of economic independence, is associated with enhanced vulnerability.

**Country of birth.** Country of birth was not recorded for about one-third of all victims. For those for whom it was known, victims originated in twenty-six different countries. The great majority of victims were Australian-born, however, and nothing

of significant interest was discerned in relation to any particular overseas-born group from the data available.

**Racial appearance.** Table 7 shows the racial appearance of victims in each jurisdiction.

**Table 7: Homicide: Racial Appearance of Victim by Jurisdiction, Australia 1990-91**

Racial Appearance	Jurisdiction								
	NSW (incl. ACT)	VIC.	QLD	WA	SA	TAS.	NT	AUST.	%
White	103	67	46	15	18	5	11	265	75%
Aboriginal	7	1	11	8	4	0	15	46	13%
Other	14	8	0	0	1	0	1	24	7%
Unknown	10	1	3	0	2	0	0	16	5%
Total	134	77	60	23	25	5	27	351	100%
Victims	(38%)	(22%)	(17%)	(7%)	(7%)	(1%)	(8%)	(100%)	

Again this year, the most notable aspect of this table, indeed of the character of Australian homicide generally, is the vast over-representation of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders as victims (and as offenders as well), bearing in mind that they compose only 1.5 per cent of the total Australian population.

Whereas the overall homicide rate this year was 2.1 per 100,000 of the population, for Aboriginal persons it was 17.8. Thirteen per cent of all victims were Aboriginal: this was made up of 11 per cent of all male victims and 16 per cent of all female victims.

When the figures are further disaggregated by sex the enhanced risk for Aboriginal women is evident: the rate for all females was 1.7 per 100,000, whilst the rate for Aboriginal women was ten times that figure. The rate for all males was 2.4 per 100,000 whilst that for Aboriginal men was eight times that figure. The proportion overall of Australian male victims to female victims for this year approached 2:1, whereas 50 per cent of all Aboriginal victims were female.

It is useful to assess Aboriginal vulnerability by jurisdiction. In the Northern Territory, where Aboriginal persons make up 22 per cent of the population, 56 per cent of all victims were Aboriginal persons. Proportionately, the figures for Queensland and Western Australia were even more noteworthy: in Queensland Aboriginal persons make up 2.4 per cent of the

population and 18 per cent of the victims; in Western Australia they compose 2.7 per cent of the population and 35 per cent of the victims (these figures are similar to last year).

**Table 8: Homicide: Appearance of Victim and Offender Pairs, Australia 1990-91**

Victim Appearance	Offender Appearance			
	White	Aboriginal	Other	Unknown
White	234	11	2	13
Aboriginal	5	52	0	0
Other	5	2	14	4
Unknown	4	5	0	8

Table 8 shows the racial appearance of victim-offender pairs. There were 11 cases where the offender was an Aboriginal person and the victim was white: in a further five instances, the offender was white and the victim was an Aboriginal person. None of these incidents appeared to be racially motivated and Australian homicide remains overwhelmingly intra-racial.

There is little of note regarding homicides involving people of other racial origin, except to observe the low incidence and the fact that both victim and offender were almost always of the same race.

**Alcohol/drug use.** Information about whether victims were under the influence of alcohol or other drugs was available in 60 per cent of cases. In those cases, 43 per cent of all victims were known to be under the influence of alcohol: this consisted of 55 per cent of males and 26 per cent of females (in the Northern Territory 70 per cent of all victims were alcohol affected). There was some variability according to age, with a higher proportion of the younger than older victims being alcohol affected. Aboriginality was also a factor, with 72 per cent of Aboriginal victims recorded as being under the influence of alcohol.

It is necessary to bear in mind when considering these figures that a high proportion of the total Australian population at highest risk of homicide—males aged from 20 to 49—are likely to be under the influence of alcohol at the times of highest incidence of homicide—Friday and Saturday evenings. However, the relationship between alcohol and violence is complex and no direct causal connection should be assumed.

---

There was negligible incidence of other drug influence amongst victims.

**Criminal history.** Criminal histories were available for about 80 per cent of victims. Of those cases where it was recorded, 36 per cent of victims had previous convictions, about half of them for violent offences. Two-thirds of these were male. For Aboriginal persons, about half of all victims had a criminal history: very low figures were recorded for those of other racial backgrounds.



---

# The Offender

**T**here were 338 identified suspects and offenders in relation to the 323 homicide incidents which occurred in 1990-91. There were 45 incidents for which no suspect had been identified at the time of data collection.

We now turn to a consideration of the characteristics of homicide offenders (including those who at the time of data collection were suspects only, rather than charged or convicted persons), to see which of them are associated with enhanced rates of offending.

**Sex and age.** Table 9 shows the number and rate of male and female offenders in different age groups.

Table 9 demonstrates that homicide offenders remain overwhelmingly male: males outnumbered females by a factor of nine overall, though there were considerable variations between age groups. Thus, the ratio between males and females for offenders aged 30-39 was 6:1, but rose to 30:1 for those aged 40-49. Figure 5 shows the spread of the ages of both male and female offenders.

Offenders were again predominantly young: 18 per cent were aged under 20 and a further 42 per cent were aged 20-29. The percentage of male and female offenders remained very similar for each age group, despite the much higher proportion of male offenders at every age. Thus, around 60 per cent of female as well as male offenders were aged under 30. Offending dropped off rapidly thereafter, as it did last year. This pattern was very similar across all jurisdictions.

As Figure 6 shows, the rate of female offending relative to males was low across all jurisdictions: although it was elevated in the Northern Territory, it remained below the male rate by a factor of twelve.

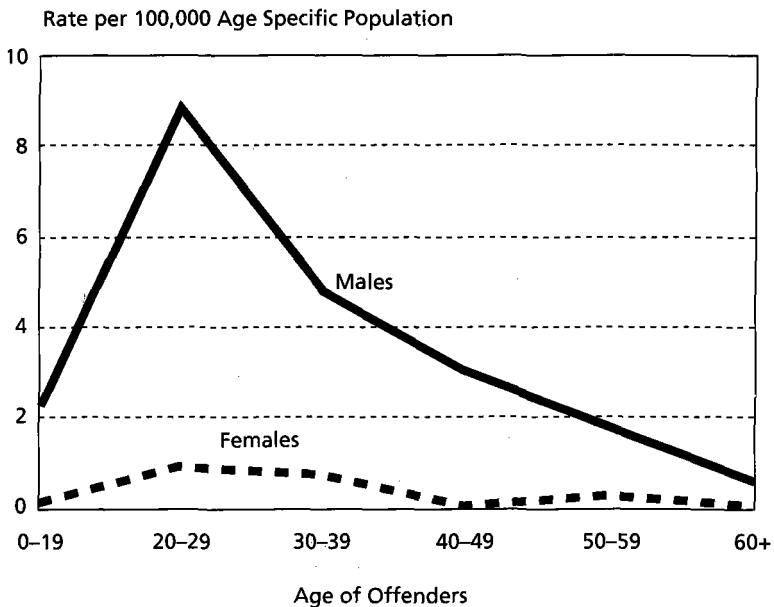
**Marital status.** Of the 85 per cent of offenders for whom marital status was recorded, just over half of men were single or divorced, but only 16 per cent of women: only 37 per cent of men were married or in a de facto relationship compared with over 70 per cent of women (similar proportions were separated from their legal or de facto spouses). These greatly differing patterns in marital status for male and female offenders again indicate that the fact of being in a marital relationship appears significant in terms of the risk of homicide offending for

**Table 9: Homicide: Age of Offender by Sex, Number and Rate per 100,000, Age Specific Population, Australia 1990-91**

Sex of Offender	Age of Offender							Total	%
	0-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+	Unknown		
Male	54 (2.1)	123 (8.8)	64 (4.8)	34 (3.1)	15 (1.9)	8 (0.7)	7	305 (3.6)	90%
Female	6 (0.2)	13 (1.0)	10 (0.8)	1 (0.1)	2 (0.3)	1 (0.1)	-	33 (0.4)	10%
Total	60	136	74	35	17	9	7	338	100%
	18%	42%	22%	10%	5%	3%	2%		



**Figure 5: Homicide: Age of Offenders, Australia 1990-91**



women: its significance will be underlined when we examine the relationships between victims and offenders.

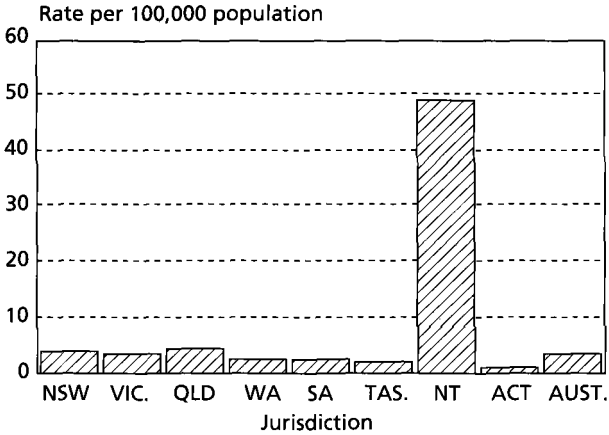
**Employment.** Employment status was recorded for two-thirds of all offenders: where it was known, less than one-third of offenders overall were reported to be employed, and for women the proportion was less than 20 per cent, though many of these would, of course, be out of the paid work force because of domestic duties.

**Country of birth.** Country of birth was not reliably recorded for a high proportion of offenders: those for whom it was known originated from twenty-five different countries. The great majority of offenders were known to be Australian-born and no single country appeared to be over-represented, though patterns may emerge over time.

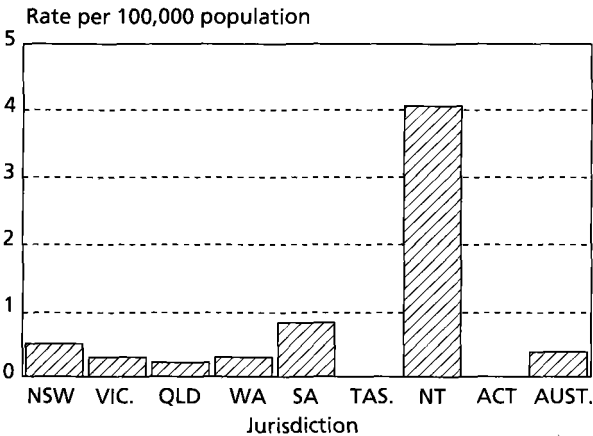
**Racial appearance.** Table 10 shows the racial appearance of offenders in each jurisdiction.

**Figure 6: Homicide: Jurisdiction and Sex of Offenders\*, Australia 1990-91**

Males



Females



N.B. These two figures are not comparable, as owing to the smaller number of female offenders, different rates per 100,000 population are used.

\* There were 45 incidents in which no offender was identified.

**Table 10: Homicide: Racial Appearance of Offenders by Jurisdiction, Australia 1990-91**

Offender Appearance	Jurisdiction								%
	NSW	VIC.	QLD	WA	SA	TAS.	NT	AUST.	
White	71	62	47	15	18	5	12	230	68%
Aboriginal	14	4	12	7	4	0	30	71	21%
Other	6	6	1	0	1	0	1	15	4%
Unknown	20	2	0	0	0	0	0	22	7%
Total	111	74	60	22	23	5	43	338	100%

Even more apparent this year was the vast over-representation of Aboriginal persons amongst homicide offenders: 21 per cent of all offenders were Aboriginal. It should be noted that this figure was inflated by 11 Aboriginal offenders being charged in relation to one offence. However, even if this case were omitted, the figure would remain 18 per cent, compared with last year's 15 per cent. It applies to both Aboriginal men and women. In terms of rates of offending, whereas the overall rate for males this year was 3.6 per 100,000 of the total population, the rate for Aboriginal males was 52 per 100,000 of the Aboriginal population; the overall rate for females was 0.4, whilst the rate for Aboriginal women was 5.3.

There were jurisdictional differences in the race of offenders similar to those for victims mentioned earlier: in the Northern Territory, where Aboriginal persons make up 22 per cent of the population, 70 per cent of offenders were Aboriginal (56 per cent of victims); in Queensland they compose 2.4 per cent of the population and 20 per cent of offenders (18 per cent of victims); in Western Australia they make up 2.7 per cent of the population and 32 per cent of offenders (35 per cent of victims).

Similar to last year, there were very low rates of offending by those of other racial backgrounds.

**Alcohol/drug use.** Information about alcohol/drug influence was available for only just over half of all offenders: of these, 75 per cent were under the influence of alcohol. This figure applied across all jurisdictions and for both men and women. Proportionately about twice as many Aboriginal as white offenders were alcohol affected; nearly two-thirds of those offenders who were alcohol affected were under the age of 30.

There was no significant involvement of any illicit drugs by offenders.

---

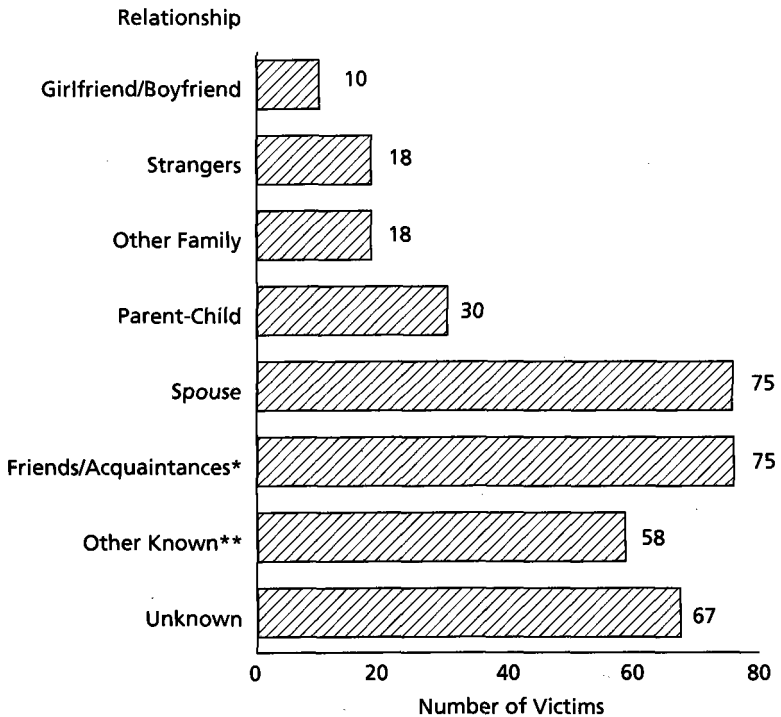
**Criminal history.** Criminal histories were available for nearly 90 per cent of offenders. At least two-thirds had a previous criminal record, and for more than half of these a violent offence had been recorded; in the case of women offenders, about one-third had previous convictions, over half of these for violent offences. At least 80 per cent of Aboriginal offenders had criminal histories: twice as many Aboriginal offenders as whites had previous convictions for serious assault.

**Murder-suicide.** A total of 23 offenders committed suicide following the incident, and a further four attempted suicide: these together made up 8 per cent of identified offenders. Two suicided after arrest, the remainder immediately after the murder. They were all male and none was Aboriginal. In two-thirds of these cases, the victim and offender were or had previously been in a spousal relationship: in almost all the remaining instances, the victim and offender were closely related to each other.

# Relationship between Victim and Offender

It has already been suggested that the relationship between the victim and offender is likely to be a much more powerful marker than, say, indications of the immediate circumstances of the incident, in comprehending the reason, if reason there be in any logical sense, for the incident to have occurred. Figure 7 shows the number of victims in each category of relationship.

**Figure 7: Homicide: Relationship between Victims and Offenders, Australia 1990-91**



\* Refers to friends, long and short-term acquaintances, homosexual relationships and gang members.

\*\* Refers to sex rivals, prostitute/client relationships, business relationships, citizen/police and others known to each other but the nature of the relationship is unknown.

Table 11 sets out the primary relationship between victims and offenders in each jurisdiction. There was considerable variation between jurisdictions this year, with South Australia recording a particularly high proportion of spousal homicides, but the significance of these variations can only be assessed over time.

**Table 11: Homicide: Victim Jurisdiction by Primary Relationship, Australia 1990-91**

Relation- ship	Jurisdiction of Victim								AUST. %
	NSW (inc ACT)	VIC.	QLD	WA	SA	TAS.	NT	AUST.	
Spouse	19	19	10	4	12	1	10	75	21%
Parent-Child	19	3	3	1	0	2	2	30	9%
Other Family	7	2	3	5	0	0	1	18	5%
Friends/ Acquaintances*	21	14	21	8	1	1	9	75	21%
Girlfriend/ Boyfriend	6	2	1	0	0	1	0	10	3%
Other Known**	23	19	9	2	3	0	2	58	17%
Strangers	3	5	5	2	0	0	3	18	5%
Unknown	36	13	8	1	9	0	0	67	19%
Total	134	77	60	23	25	5	27	351	100%
Victims	38%	22%	17%	7%	7%	1%	8%	100%	

\*Refers to friends, long and short-term acquaintances, homosexual relationships and gang members.

\*\* Refers to sex rivals, prostitute/client relationships, business relationships, citizen/police, and others known to each other but the nature of the relationship is unknown.

'Domestic' homicides, that is those occurring between family members, including spouses, both married and de facto, present and former, this year accounted for 44 per cent of all homicides *where the relationship was recorded*. Twenty-six per cent were spousal, though this is likely to be a slight overestimate of the real situation, given that spousal homicides tend to be more often solved and that this relationship is more frequently apparent from police records than other kinds. Of these, 85 per cent of victims were women. Forty-two per cent of all female victims were killed by their spouses, and 6 per cent of all males.

The high proportion of women offenders compared to males in spousal homicide is noteworthy: 34 per cent of all women offenders (n=12) killed their spouses compared with 19 per cent of males (n=62). Sixteen of the 31 child victims (aged under 16) were killed by their fathers or de facto fathers and five by their mothers. These represented 5 per cent of all male offences and 14 per cent of all female offences.

A further 26 per cent of victims where the relationship was recorded were killed by friends/long-term acquaintances. Male victims in this relationship outnumbered females by a factor of six.

Overall, the figures were very similar to last year: the slight decline in the number of homicides between friends/acquaintances is partly accounted for by the designation of a separate category of girlfriend/boyfriend relationship. This category is problematic because the quality of the relationship differs from spousal relationships as, by definition, the parties do not cohabit: however, the forces at work in bringing about the homicide incident are frequently the same as those in spousal relationships, namely jealousy or the termination of the relationship.

Table 12 shows relationship data disaggregated by race.

**Table 12: Homicide: Racial Appearance of Victim by Relationship, Australia 1990-91**

Relationship	White	Aboriginal	Other	Unknown	Total	%
Spouse	45	22	7	1	75	21%
Parent-Child	23	3	2	2	30	9%
Other Family	12	4	1	1	18	5%
Friends/Acquaint.	56	9	6	4	75	21%
Girlfriend/Boyfriend	10	0	0	0	10	3%
Other Known	50	3	2	3	58	17%
Strangers	14	2	1	1	18	5%
Unknown	55	3	5	4	67	19%
Total	265	46	24	16	351	100%
Victims	75%	13%	7%	5%	100%	

This table clearly shows the enhanced risk of spousal homicide amongst Aboriginal people. Of those victims for whom the relationship was known, 21 per cent of whites were killed by their spouses, compared with 51 per cent of Aboriginal victims. This is reflected in the high proportion of spousal homicides in the Northern Territory. The proportions for all

---

other categories of relationship were quite similar between whites and Aboriginal people.

Stranger homicide accounted for only 6 per cent of those incidents *where the relationship was recorded*. For 66 victims the relationship was unknown, and for 45 of these no offender or suspect had been identified at the time of data collection. It is probable that a proportion of the 45 unsolved incidents would have involved offenders unknown to the victim, as these clearly are the more difficult cases to solve.



---

## Summary

**A**lthough the overall homicide rate for Australia has remained stable over the past two years, a significant increase in the number of homicides occurred in New South Wales and the Northern Territory. More specifically, there has been an escalation in the number of homicides resulting from other crimes—sexual assault and robbery—in New South Wales and in the number of Aboriginal domestic homicides in the Northern Territory. It is necessary to be cautious about these increases, however, as we do not know yet whether these figures represent a trend in these jurisdictions.

The data available on homicides occurring throughout Australia in 1990-91 indicate once more that there are clusters of elements associated both with the incidents themselves and with the participants in them which indicate enhanced risk.

There appeared to be little variation in the rate of homicide between urban and rural areas: the distribution of homicides coincided closely with population distribution. The majority of incidents occurred on residential premises, often the victim's own home which, in a quarter of all instances, was also the offender's home. A high proportion of incidents occurred at the weekend, mostly at night.

When we consider the precipitating factors in these incidents, it is necessary to interpret the findings with caution, as available police data are frequently inadequate in conveying the complexity of the dynamic interaction between victim and offender. However, it is possible to say that the patterns of homicide discernible from incidents which occurred last year are confirmed by this year's data. Homicides remain essentially of two kinds: almost half concern people who have been in a sexual or family relationship and the incident results from the breakdown in that relationship; about a further quarter of incidents involve peers who are well known to each other, often both young and both alcohol-affected, and often resulting from a trivial altercation or misunderstanding. There appear to be few incidents arising from gang disputes or from activities associated with organised crime.

The pattern of weapon usage Australia-wide in 1990-91 remained very similar to last year, though there were

---

jurisdictional variations. Again, around one-quarter of incidents involved a firearm, most frequently a .22 calibre rifle. A further one-third of incidents involved knives or other sharp implements. The most common means of homicide again was the aggregated category of assault, which included attacks with blunt instruments and strangulation, as well as beatings.

The choice of weapon may be related to the circumstances of the incident: firearms seemed to be used more frequently than might be expected where jealousy or the termination of an intimate relationship was involved, but less frequently used in situations of trivial altercations between peers, where assaults were far more likely. Homicides involving the crimes of robbery and sexual assault most frequently involved assault rather than the use of a lethal weapon.

Choice of weapon also varied to some extent with the relationship between victim and offender. Firearms usage was spread fairly evenly over different relationships, whereas knives were used more frequently in spousal killings, and assault was most commonly found in stranger killings and where victim and offender were friends.

When we consider the characteristics of victims, once again we find associations which suggest enhanced risk. The most obvious of these relate to sex and age, as homicide in Australia remains very much the province of young males.

Again this year males greatly outnumbered females as victims of homicide, though not as dramatically as last year, owing to an increase in the number of women victims in their twenties. It will be important to watch whether this pattern persists in future years.

Infants under the age of one year were at greatest risk, with a homicide rate notably in excess of any other age group. The number of victims aged between one and ten years also increased from 13 to 20. Children under the age of ten made up 9 per cent of all victims: three-quarters of them were killed by their parents or de facto parents.

The most notable feature of the character of Australian homicide concerns the over-representation of Aboriginal people, for whom the rate of victimisation was more than eight times that for the population as a whole. Aboriginal women were at particular risk: their rate of victimisation was ten times that of Australian females generally. In the overwhelming majority of instances, homicide was intra-racial; where two races were involved, no incident appeared to be racially motivated.

---

A high proportion of homicide victims shared other features too, including single marital status and unemployment. Alcohol was involved in a high proportion of incidents and nearly half of all victims were known to have been alcohol-affected. More than one-third of all victims had criminal records: most of them were male and half of them had convictions for violent offences.

Offenders also shared a number of characteristics which were associated with enhanced risk. They too were predominantly young and male: males outnumbered females by a factor of nine. Nearly two-thirds of both males and females were aged under thirty.

A notable difference emerged this year concerning the marital status of men and women offenders: over half of male offenders were single, but only one in six females. This suggests that the fact of being in a marital relationship may enhance the risk of offending for women: over one-third of women offenders had killed their spouses, compared with 19 per cent of men. It will be important to note whether this trend persists.

Even more apparent this year was the vast over-representation of Aboriginal offenders: over 20 per cent of offenders were Aboriginal and this figure applies to both males and females. For males the rate of offending amongst Aboriginal people exceeded the overall rate by a factor of 14, and for females by a factor of 13.

Where it was recorded, three-quarters of offenders were known to be under the influence of alcohol: this figure applied to both men and women but disproportionately to those under the age of 30 and to Aboriginal people. About two-thirds of all offenders had previous criminal records, and more than half of these involved violent offences.

When we examine the relationship between victim and offender for homicides in 1990-91, we find that about one-quarter were or had previously been in spousal relationships, married or de facto. In the great majority of these instances, the woman was the victim: indeed, almost half of all female victims were killed by their spouses, compared with only 6 per cent of males.

A further one-quarter of homicides were between friends or long-term acquaintances: in the great majority of these instances both the victim and the offender were male. These patterns were very similar to last year.

Despite similarities in the character of homicide incidents and in the people involved in them, it is important to remember that each is unique. Each is the consequence of the

---

complex interaction of factors connected to both the personality and experience of the participants and to the immediate circumstances in which they find themselves. The more we can learn about all these factors, the greater the likelihood of devising effective strategies for homicide prevention and control.