

HOMICIDES

**IN AUSTRALIA
1989–90**

Heather Strang

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Australian Institute of Criminology

@ Australian Institute of Criminology
1991

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Heather Strang
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INTRODUCTION

Background to the National Homicide Monitoring Program

Homicide is the most serious offence under Australian law. In its more outrageous forms it preoccupies our media, and gives rise to widespread public concern. However, the prominence given to a few incidents tends to present a distorted picture of the nature of Australian homicide. Although a great deal of information is gathered by police in the course of their investigations, this material has not, in the main, been examined from the wider perspective to see what can be learned about the character of homicide in Australia as a whole.

During 1988 and 1989 a group of distinguished Australians worked together on the National Committee on Violence. This Committee was established following a meeting between the Prime Minister, the State Premiers and the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory, in the aftermath of the tragic events in Melbourne's Hoddle and Queen Streets in 1987. Its task was to assess the incidence of violence in Australia, to investigate causes of violent behaviour and to propose measures for the prevention and control of violence.

In its Report, entitled *Violence: Directions for Australia* (1990), the Committee observed that there was a serious lack of systematic information in Australia concerning the nature and extent of violent crime in general, and homicide in particular. For example, it was not possible, to establish accurately, on an Australia-wide basis, the proportion of homicides occurring within the family, the proportion committed by juveniles, or the proportion committed in the course of other offences such as robbery or sexual assault. More complex questions, such as the proportion of homicides occurring within the family committed with firearms, could not even be estimated.

As a result, the Committee recommended in its Report the establishment of a National Homicide Monitoring Program to collect, on an ongoing basis, information about the characteristics of homicide incidents, victims and offenders. It observed that such data could later be extended to cover other categories of violent crime. It further recommended that this task be undertaken by the Australian Institute of Criminology.

The Report which follows is the first of a series which will describe and analyse Australian homicides on an annual basis.

Aims of the Program

The principal aim of the Program is to provide baseline data which will, over time, permit the detection of patterns and trends in homicide in each Australian jurisdiction. The desirability of such information is clear – not only to provide for basic public understanding about homicide risk, but also to serve as the foundation for the rational formulation of public policy in such areas as family law, child protection and firearms regulation.

The Program will also provide insights and opportunities for special analysis on issues such as the circumstances in which firearms are most commonly used, the characteristics of the participants in domestic homicides, the precipitating factors in such homicides, whether some minority groups – ethnic, racial, homosexual – are especially vulnerable, and so on.

In addition, it is hoped that this Program may eventually be used as a model for the investigation of other categories of violent crime, such as serious assault. These in turn may have application in homicide prevention strategies, for although homicides are rare, assaults are not: many homicides begin as assaults, so to reduce the number of deaths from homicide it is necessary to reduce the incidence of risky similar offences, and to reduce the likelihood that such offences, when they occur, will end in death.

Defining Homicide for the Program

In defining homicide for the purposes of the Program, the following were included:

- all cases, excluding driving-related offences, resulting in a person or persons being charged with:
 - murder
 - manslaughter – infanticide
 - dangerous act causing death (in the Northern Territory)
- all murder-suicides classed as murder by the police
- all deaths classed by the police as homicide, but with no suspect apprehended.

The Data

In order to meet the aims of the Program, detailed information has been collected on each homicide incident occurring, for the purpose of this first report, during the 1989-90 financial

year, and each victim and offender involved in these incidents. The intention thus 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 of the circumstances which enhance the likelihood of homicide occurring.

Information sought about the incident broadly relates to the time and location of its occurrence, the cause of death and the circumstances surrounding the incident. Information sought about the participants broadly relates to their demographic characteristics, the influence of alcohol or other drugs, their criminal histories and their relationships to one another.

It is important to mention the provisions of the *Privacy Act 1988* in relation to this Program. This Commonwealth legislation places restrictions on the disclosure of personal information by all Commonwealth instrumentalities. Strict provisions relating to the confidentiality of the data collected have been observed, as is required by the Act.

Information relating to 306 incidents was collected, involving 330 victims and 335 suspects/offenders. Several cases involved more than one victim or more than one offender, or very occasionally multiples of both; in 33 cases no suspect had been identified at the time data was collected. There were no homicides in the Australian Capital Territory in 1989-90.

Tables 1 and 2 show the distribution of victims and offenders by sex and jurisdiction. Over half of these offenders had admitted the offence at the time of data collection and a further 7 percent had committed suicide prior to arrest. There were no homicides in the ACT.

The actual breakdown of numbers of participants in the 306 incidents was as follows:

Victims

In 290 incidents there was 1 victim

In 12 incidents there were 2 victims

In 3 incidents there were 3 victims

In 1 incident there were 6 victims

Offenders

In 33 incidents no suspect had been identified at the time data were collected

In 233 incidents there was 1 offender

In 30 incidents there were 2 offenders

In 4 incidents there were 3 offenders

In 2 incidents there were 4 offenders

In 2 incidents there were 5 offenders

In 1 incident there were 6 offenders

In 1 incident there were 7 offenders

Homicide is an offence which, as one would expect, usually comes quickly to the attention of the police: police became aware of about 85 per cent of all incidents within twenty-four hours.

Caveats on the Data

The data for this Report are derived exclusively from police records, supplemented as necessary by information provided directly by police involved in individual homicide investigations. Although police in all jurisdictions were unfailingly cooperative in providing the data sought, a number of problems have arisen because of the difficulties involved in adapting to this Program record-keeping practices designed for dealing with the exigencies of the criminal justice system. Thus, in most jurisdictions a number of details relating to the offender will be routinely recorded, because this is the priority in police needs, but less concerning the victim. Missing data are regrettably very much a feature of the Program data base for this year. Nevertheless, procedures are being put in place to minimise these problems in years to come.

As well, it is reasonable to assume that homicides do take place from time to time which do not come to police attention. There may be incidents in which the circumstances and cause of death are not apparent to a doctor or coroner. In addition, there may be a number of persons reported missing each year who have been murdered and their bodies never found.

A special caveat is needed in respect of the data concerning offenders. (In this report, the term 'offender', refers mainly to suspects or alleged offenders rather than convicted persons). It must be borne in mind that not uncommonly an accused is charged with murder or manslaughter, but that later the police themselves decide to drop or amend the charge. It is also possible for the accused to be discharged at the committal hearing, acquitted at the trial or convicted of a lesser offence. It is impossible to know what proportion of the cases included here falls into these categories, as many have not yet come to trial. However, Wallace, in her detailed examination of homicides occurring in New South Wales between 1968 and 1981, suggests that in New South Wales as many as 25 per cent of suspects are subsequently discharged at committal, no billed or acquitted (Wallace 1986). (It is intended that data collection will eventually be extended beyond police records to encompass court disposition of homicide cases).

It is worthwhile, however, to consider that a useful distinction can be made for the purposes of this Program between a legal definition of guilt and a sociological view of homicide offending. There are many reasons for which an accused may correctly be

found not guilty, other than because he or she did not cause the death of the victim. For the purposes of this Program, it is not guilt before the law which is of primary interest or relevance. An ultimate disposition dismissing charges against as many as 25 per cent of accused should not therefore detract from the Program's findings.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that, given that police records and statements of investigating police were the only sources of data, a degree of subjectivity may be inevitable in representing what are frequently very complex circumstances, with many possible points of view. Nevertheless, the Australian Institute of Criminology is confident that the data represent a valid, if incomplete, picture of homicide incidents, and those involved in them, in Australia in 1989-90.

HOMICIDE IN AUSTRALIA 1989-90

Research into Australian Homicide

Homicides do not occur randomly over time or space, nor do they involve random participants. The purpose of this analysis is to identify as far as possible the characteristics of homicide incidents, victims and offenders. The analysis will describe those features of the participants or the context in which they operate which appear to enhance the risk of a homicide occurring, and also the risk of an individual becoming a victim or perpetrator of homicide.

It is important to bear in mind at all times, however, that the data presented below refer only to events occurring in 1989-90. As random fluctuations will inevitably characterise relatively rare events occurring in a short time frame, generalisations should be made with the greatest caution. The value of much of these data will emerge over years to come, when patterns and trends will become discernible.

To place these data in context it is useful to consider previous research into Australian homicide, even though this has been carried out only in single jurisdictions, rather than Australia-wide. One of the earliest studies of homicide in Australia was conducted by Grabosky and others in South Australia (1981). The Law Reform Commission of Victoria has published several reports on the subject, and a major report on incidents occurring in Victoria between 1968 and 1990 will be published shortly (Law Reform Commission of Victoria, forthcoming). Kapardis and Cole (1988) have published a report on the characteristics of Victorian homicides which occurred between 1984 and 1988, while Polk and Ransom have undertaken a detailed qualitative study of homicides occurring in 1985 and 1986, based on material in the Office of the Coroner of Victoria (1990). The major study in New South Wales is Wallace's investigation of all homicides reported to police between 1968 and 1981 (1986): this was followed by a statistical update by Bonney on homicide to the end of 1986 (1987).

The Incident

The character of each homicide incident is related to the contextual features of each case. These include the jurisdiction, the geographical and physical location of the incident, the day and time it occurs, the choice of weapon or method and the precipitating circumstances, which are related both to motive and to background events.

Jurisdiction. The rate for victims is fairly uniform across Australia. The exception is the Northern Territory where for males the rate is eight times and for females four times that for Australia as a whole.

Table 1: Sex of Victim by Jurisdiction – Number and Rate per 100,000 Population, Australia 1989-90

<i>Sex of Victim</i>	<i>Jurisdiction</i>								<i>%</i>
	<i>NSW</i>	<i>VIC</i>	<i>QLD</i>	<i>WA</i>	<i>SA</i>	<i>TAS</i>	<i>NT</i>	<i>AUST</i>	
M	69 _(2.4)	47 _(2.2)	48 _(3.3)	13 _(1.6)	17 _(2.4)	5 _(2.2)	16 _(19.5)	215 _(2.5)	65
F	35 _(1.6)	31 _(1.4)	23 _(1.6)	15 _(1.9)	4 _(0.6)	2 _(0.9)	4 _(5.3)	114 _(1.3)	35
Total	104 _(1.8)	79* _(1.8)	71 _(2.5)	28 _(1.7)	21 _(1.5)	7 _(1.5)	20 _(12.8)	330* _(1.9)	100
Victims	32%	24%	22%	8%	6%	2%	9%	100%	

* Includes one whose sex was unknown at the time of data collection.

The rate for offenders is fairly uniform across Australia, with the exception of males in the Northern Territory whose rate of offending is nearly seven times that for Australian males as a whole.

In every jurisdiction apart from the ACT there was at least one incident where more than one victim was killed, but in 95 percent of incidents there was only one victim. Similarly, in every jurisdiction other than the ACT there was at least one incident where more than one offender was involved, but in at least three-quarters of all incidents there was only one offender.

Geographical area. Analysis of the geographical distribution of homicide in Australia indicates that, as would be anticipated, most incidents occur in the major centres of population. A little over half of all homicides took place in the suburbs of Australia's capital cities, while another 20 per cent occurred in regional

centres, which includes all country towns and major centres such as Rockhampton and Shepparton. The variations displayed in Table 3 are a reflection of the differing demographic characteristics of each jurisdiction.

Table 2: Sex of Offender by Jurisdiction – Number and Rate per 100,000 Population, Australia 1989-90

<i>Sex of Offender</i>	<i>Jurisdiction</i>								<i>%</i>
	<i>NSW</i>	<i>VIC</i>	<i>QLD</i>	<i>WA</i>	<i>SA</i>	<i>TAS</i>	<i>NT</i>	<i>AUST</i>	
M	94 _(3.3)	64 _(3.0)	68 _(4.8)	22 _(2.7)	16 _(2.3)	6 _(2.7)	18 _(22.0)	288 _(3.4)	86
F	13 _(0.5)	12 _(0.6)	10 _(0.7)	2 _(0.3)	4 _(0.6)	-(-)	1 _(1.4)	42 _(0.5)	13
Unknown	1	2	-	-	2	-	-	5	1
Total	108 _(1.9)	78 _(1.8)	78 _(2.7)	24 _(1.5)	22 _(1.5)	6 _(1.3)	19 _(12.2)	335 _(2.0)	100
Offenders	32%	23%	23%	7%	7%	2%	6%	100%	

Table 3: Jurisdiction of Incident by Geographical Area, Australia 1989-90

<i>Geographical Area</i>	<i>Jurisdiction of Incident</i>								<i>%</i>
	<i>NSW</i>	<i>VIC</i>	<i>QLD</i>	<i>WA</i>	<i>SA</i>	<i>TAS</i>	<i>NT</i>	<i>AUST</i>	
Inner City	8	1	3	1	1	1	1	16	5
Suburban	54	56	26	10	14	2	2	164	54
Regional Centre	17	8	25	8	3	1	1	63	21
Aboriginal Community	-	1	9	2	-	-	15	27	9
Other Rural	12	5	1	4	-	1	-	23	8
Other	1	-	3	-	-	-	-	4	1
Unknown	3	3	1	-	2	-	-	9	3
Total	95	74	68	25	20	5	19	306	100
Incidents	31%	24%	22%	8%	7%	2%	6%	100%	

A significant feature here is the volume of homicides occurring in Aboriginal communities (which includes fringe camps): 12 per cent of all homicides throughout Australia involved Aboriginal victims and in the Northern Territory 75 per cent involved Aboriginal victims; a high proportion of all these resided in Aboriginal communities.

Location. Almost 60 per cent of all homicides occurred within residential premises. More than two-thirds of these occurred within the victim's own home which, it should be noted, not infrequently was also the offender's home: 25 per cent of victims and offenders were cohabiting at the time of the incident. About 13 per cent of incidents occurred in the street (a high proportion of Aboriginal homicides in particular occurred in the street, rather than inside residential premises), while a further 6 per cent occurred at a pub, club or disco, or in their environs.

An interesting aspect of location concerns those places where homicides rarely occurred: shops, shopping malls, carparks, sporting venues, beaches, public transport, taxis and other vehicles, public parks, railway and bus stations, and places of entertainment (other than venues for alcohol consumption) together accounted for fewer than 8 per cent of all homicides.

Time of day/day of week. Information concerning the time of the incident was not available in a quarter of cases. For those cases for which data was available, 45 per cent occurred between six in the evening and midnight, and a further 26 per cent between midnight and six in the morning. Somewhat more incidents occurred on Fridays and Saturdays than other days of the week: 35 per cent of incidents occurred on these two days.

Precipitating factors. Special caution is needed in interpreting results in this area, as no information is available concerning the precipitating circumstances in 20 per cent of cases, and half of these occurred in New South Wales. Table 4 therefore illustrates the situation without New South Wales data.

Table 4: Jurisdiction of Incident by Primary Precipitating Factors (without NSW), 1989-90

<i>Primary Precipitating Factors</i>	<i>Jurisdiction of Incident</i>						<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>%</i>
	<i>VIC</i>	<i>QLD</i>	<i>WA</i>	<i>SA</i>	<i>TAS</i>	<i>NT</i>		
Family/domestic	12	14	5	2	1	4	38	18
Over Money	5	4	-	-	-	-	9	4
Desertion/Jealousy	7	8	8	1	-	2	26	12
Other Altercation	15	15	5	7	2	8	52	25
Revenge	2	2	3	-	-	1	8	4
Sexual Assault	1	3	-	3	-	-	7	3
Robbery	3	1	-	1	-	1	6	3
Mental Disorder	4	2	-	-	1	-	7	3
Other Factors listed below*	13	11	3	-	1	-	28	14
Unknown	12	8	1	6	-	3	30	14
Total	74	68	25	20	5	19	211	100

*over drugs (4)
 child abuse (4)
 carelessness (4)
 over sex (3)
 'hate' (racial or homosexual) (2)
 other factors not involving an altercation (6)

arson (1)
 contract (1)
 suicide pact (1)
 over children (1)
 killed by fleeing felon (1)

In the remaining jurisdictions, family/domestic altercations accounted for at least 18 per cent of all cases, with altercations relating to the termination of a relationship, desertion or jealousy accounting for a further 12 per cent. Taken together, these categories, involving intimates and relating to the breakdown of their relationships account for at least 30 percent of all homicides in 1989-90.

'Other altercations', which excludes all other given categories of dispute, accounts for at least 25 per cent of the total. As mentioned above, the data sources indicate that these incidents tend to be between male peers, occurring spontaneously over apparently trivial matters, frequently when either, both or all participants are alcohol-affected.

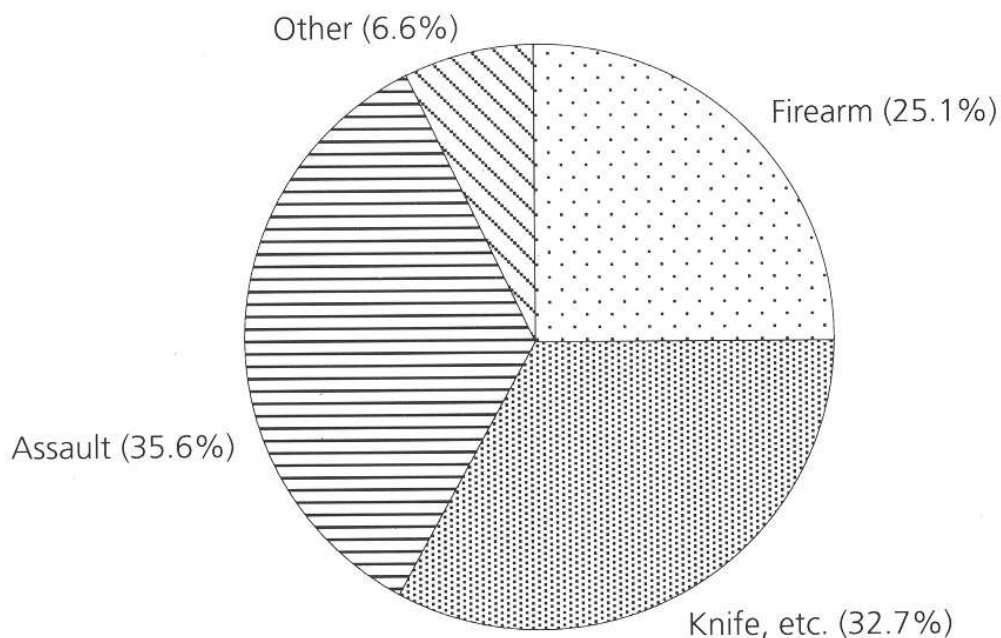
It is interesting to observe the relatively small proportion of homicides which occurred in the course of either sexual assaults or robberies. Very few seem to have occurred as a consequence of

altercations over drugs or 'hate' (such as racial or homosexual confrontations), although it is certainly possible that these may be underestimated because of inadequacies in the data sources.

As far as jurisdictional differences are concerned, although such variations are evident, they must be viewed cautiously at this stage. No conclusions are justified on one year's data, but significant patterns or trends may well emerge over time.

Weapon/Method. Firearms, knives and other sharp implements, and assault (including strangulation) accounted for 93 per cent of all homicides. Figure 1 displays the proportion of weapons and methods used most commonly by offenders in Australia.

Figure 1: Primary Weapon/Method – Australia 1989-90



Overall, firearms-related homicides constituted 25 per cent of the total in 1989-90: 10 per cent of all incidents involved .22 calibre rifles and 7 per cent involved shotguns. These two weapons together account for 80 per cent of all gun-related homicides. The use of hand guns, automatic weapons and so-called 'assault weapons' is rare owing to controls on their availability in most jurisdictions.

In Queensland, 34 per cent of all homicides involved the use of a firearm, which is a considerably greater proportion than for any other jurisdiction. This finding should be treated cautiously, however, as it may be due to the kind of random fluctuation to be expected when dealing with relatively small numbers, and its significance can only be assessed over a period of several years. It is matched by a correspondingly lower incidence of homicide by knives and by assault.

New South Wales, by contrast had fewer than expected firearms-related homicides and a correspondingly higher proportion of assault homicides.

It is worth noting the especially low level of firearms-related homicides in the Northern Territory in 1989-90: these made up only 11 per cent of the total for that jurisdiction. Northern Territory Police advise that it is relatively uncommon for homicides within Aboriginal communities to involve the use of firearms, and a bout 90 per cent of a II homicides in that jurisdiction involved Aboriginal offenders.

It has sometimes been suggested that a gun may act as an 'equaliser' between the sexes, given that other means of homicide call for varying degrees of physical strength. However, this hypothesis is not supported by these data: 23 per cent of males chose firearms as their method, and only 12 per cent of females. Almost half of all homicides committed by women involved a knife or other sharp instrument.

As far as the sex of the victims is concerned, significantly more men than women died as a result of a knife attack (32 per cent as opposed to 20 percent), which accords with the finding concerning women's method of choice, given that when women kill, men are almost five times more often their victims than are other women. The only other significant difference between the sexes in means of death related to strangulation: 12 per cent of females were strangled but only 1 per cent of males.

Table 5 illustrates the use of different weapons/methods in different geographical regions.

Suburban areas and regional centres were similar in terms of the choice of method/weapon used in homicide in 1989-90. In both cases, firearms, knives and assault were employed almost equally. However, in the case of those homicides occurring in rural localities outside towns, that is on properties and in open bushland, almost half involved firearms.

Table 5: Geographical Area of Incident by Primary Weapon/ Method, Australia 1989-90

<i>Geographical Area</i>	<i>Primary Weapon/Method used</i>					<i>Australia</i>	<i>%</i>
	<i>Firearm</i>	<i>Knife etc.</i>	<i>Assault</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Unknown</i>		
Inner City	1	6	8	1	-	16	5
Suburban	44	51	58	9	2	164	54
Regional	17	25	17	4	-	63	21
Centre							
Aboriginal	1	12	13	1	-	27	9
Community							
Other Rural	10	3	7	3	-	23	8
Other	2	1	1	-	-	4	1
Unknown	1	1	4	2	1	9	3
Total	76	99	108	20	3	306	100
Incidents	25%	32%	35%	7%	1%	100%	

The data in Table 6 indicates that the weapon/method chosen may be linked to the kind of factors which precipitate the homicide incident. Bearing in mind that information relating to precipitating factors was not recorded in nearly 20 per cent of cases, the following observations can be made:

- in about half of all incidents where the precipitating factor was known to be about the termination of an intimate relationship or desertion from such a relationship, firearms were the method of choice. Although there could be other plausible explanations, this finding suggests that such homicides may be planned, rather than occurring in the heat of the moment, given the relative unavailability of guns compared with knives and other weapons.
- about 40 per cent of incidents resulting from family/domestic altercations involved knives or other sharp implements.
- those incidents described as being the consequence of 'other altercations', were so described because it was not possible to classify them more precisely, despite the range of categories available. This was usually because they appeared to be concerned with apparently trivial issues or resulting from drunken misunderstandings, almost always between men. Such incidents tend to flare up quickly without premeditation, so it is to be expected that few of them involved firearms,

given the fact that firearms are rarely carried in Australia. About half involved knives and other sharp implements and a further one-third were assaults.

- in the few (5 per cent) cases where the precipitating factor for the incident was known to be the mental disorder of the assailant, firearms were rarely involved, the method used almost always being knives and other sharp implements, or assault.
- in the few (5 per cent) cases where the precipitating factor was known to be robbery, more than half of the deaths resulted from assault. Firearms were involved in only four incidents out of a total of fifteen.

Table 6: Primary Weapon/Method Used in Incident by Primary Precipitating Factor, Australia 1989-90

<i>Primary Precipitating Factor</i>	<i>Primary Weapon/Method Used</i>					<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
	<i>Firearm</i>	<i>Knife etc</i>	<i>Assault</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Unknown</i>		
Family/domestic	13	18	14	3	-	48	16
Over Money	3	5	2	1	-	11	4
Desertion/Jealousy	16	12	6	-	-	34	11
Other Altercation	9	29	23	1	-	62	20
Revenge	3	4	3	1	-	11	4
Sexual Assault	-	1	10	-	-	11	4
Robbery	4	2	8	-	1	15	5
Mental Disorder	2	7	5	1	-	15	5
Other Factors listed below*	9	9	12	8	-	38	12
Unknown	17	12	25	5	2	61	19
Total	76	99	108	20	3	306	100

*over drugs (7)
 child abuse (5)
 carelessness (5)
 over sex (5)
 'hate' (racial or homosexual) (3)
 other factors not involving an altercation (6)

arson (2)
 contract (1)
 suicide pact (1)
 over children (1)
 killed by fleeing felon (1)
 over gambling (1)

Some interesting differences emerge when we look at choice of method/weapon for different relationships between victim and offender.

Firearms appear to be more commonly used in 'domestic' homicides than any other category: about a third of spouses were killed by firearms, and nearly half of victims where the relationship was parent-child (this category includes child-parent and parent-adult child). This compares with 20 per cent of killings where the relationship was friend/long-term acquaintance and only 13 per cent of 'stranger' killings.

Knives and other sharp instruments were used in a little more than a third of spousal homicides, nearly half of killings between friends/long-term acquaintances but only 13 percent of 'stranger' incidents.

Assault (including strangulation) was the cause of death in just over a quarter of spousal homicides, 30 per cent of killings between friends/long-term acquaintances and 40 per cent of 'stranger' homicides (there were no strangulations here).

These figures suggest that firearms are little used in spontaneous flare-ups between peers, where knives are predominantly the weapon of choice. They also suggest that the conventional picture of a 'stranger' killing – predatory stalking, dark alleys and so on – is probably inaccurate in that so few of the 'strangers' appear to have been armed at all, and therefore probably not setting out to kill: that such a high proportion involved assaults suggests that many of these are fights between peers.

In respect of firearms generally, there are a number of possibly significant factors about which nothing is known at present: for instance, it would be useful to know the proportion of firearms used in homicides that are registered weapons, the proportion owned by the offender, whether the offender held a firearms licence and whether the weapon was stolen. Consideration could be given by police to recording this information.

Drug involvement. Information concerning the extent of drug involvement in homicide incidents -whether selling, arguing over possession, getting money for drugs or any other connection – indicates that this was not a significant factor in most homicides in 1989-90. In a quarter of cases no assessment was possible concerning drug involvement, but it appears that this was a factor in no more than 8 per cent of homicides, nearly all of these being in the suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne.

There is a certain amount of anecdotal evidence on this subject, in the media and amongst some police officers, which is not supported by these data. This may of course reflect inadequacies in the data, and consideration might be given to improving recording practices in this area.

The Victim

We have observed that there are characteristics of homicide incidents – geographical, temporal and other factors- which, either in isolation or in combination with each other, indicate an increased likelihood of such incidents occurring. In the same way, there are also characteristics associated with victims – and, as will be seen, offenders – which enhance their risk of being involved in homicide incidents. Indeed, there may be several risk characteristics that both participants share. Analysis of the following variables allows conclusions to be drawn concerning those characteristics which indicate enhanced risk.

Sex. There are significant differences in homicide risk between males and females and between different age groups (see Table 7).

Table 7: Age of Victim by Sex -Number and Rate per 100,000 Population, Australia 1989-90

<i>Sex of Victim</i>	<i>Age of Victim</i>								<i>Unkwn</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
	<i><1</i>	<i>1-9</i>	<i>10-19</i>	<i>20-29</i>	<i>30-39</i>	<i>40-49</i>	<i>50-59</i>	<i>60+</i>			
M	2 _(1.6)	8 _(0.7)	25 _(1.8)	51 _(3.6)	40 _(3.0)	27 _(2.4)	22 _(2.8)	18 _(1.6)	22	215 _(2.6)	65
F	5 _(4.1)	5 _(0.5)	8 _(0.6)	24 _(1.8)	25 _(1.9)	20 _(1.9)	5 _(0.7)	11 _(0.8)	11	114 _(1.4)	35
Total	7 _(2.8) 2%	13 _(0.6) 4%	33 _(1.2) 10%	75 _(2.7) 23%	65 _(2.4) 20%	47 _(2.2) 14%	27 _(1.8) 8%	29 _(1.1) 9%	33 10%	330* _(2.0) 100%	100

* Includes one whose sex was unknown at the time of data collection.

Overall, in 1989-90 males were at twice the risk of females of becoming homicide victims. The disparity between the sexes was greatest for the 15-19 age group, when male victims outnumbered females by five to one. Disparity then diminishes, and in the 40-49 age group the difference is not large. However it increases again thereafter: in the 50-59 age group the rate for males was four times that of females; in the 60+ age group, the rate is double (and would have been even greater without the unusual serial killings of elderly women which occurred in Sydney during 1989-90).

Of those under the age of one year, females outnumbered males during 1989-90: this difference is unlikely to be sustained over a longer time frame, but should be kept under observation.

As Table 1 illustrates, the relative risk for males and females is fairly uniform across jurisdictions. Western Australia is an exception, in that for the third time since 1985 (according to ABS *Causes of Death 1988, Australia and States*) the number of female homicide victims has exceeded males. This is a rare event generally speaking, and although not necessarily significant given the small numbers involved, warrants special observation over time.

The data in Table 8 illustrate that homicide is overwhelmingly a male phenomenon, both for victims and offenders.

Table 8: Sex of Victim and Offender Pairs, Australia 1989-90*

<i>Sex of Victim and Offender</i>	%
Male victim – male offender	59
Female victim – male offender	29
Male victim – female offender	10
Female victim – female offender	2

*These figures are based on all victim-offender pairs, not principal victim-offender pairs, where the sex of both is known.

Age. Although only 8 per cent of victims were under the age of fifteen, it is important to note the special vulnerability of infants: overall, for those under the age of one year the rate was similar to that for the 20-29 age group; in the case of females, the rate was more than double.

Setting aside the age group under one year, Table 7 illustrates clearly the escalating rate of homicide, up to the 20-29 age group and the decline thereafter. For females, the rate diminishes greatly after the age of 50, and for males, after the age of 60. This pattern is similar across all jurisdictions.

Marital status. Marital status was not known for a third of victims; of the remainder, 60 per cent were single or no longer married. A slightly higher proportion of males than females were known to be single. These figures indicate that being single may of itself be associated with risk of victimisation.

Employment. Although the employment status of victims was not recorded in a third of all cases, it is significant nonetheless that of the remainder (which excluded those too young or too old to be in the workforce, together with pensioners) about equal numbers of males victims were employed as unemployed, while nearly twice as many females were unemployed as employed.

These data indicate an increased vulnerability associated with being outside the paid workforce; this seems particularly the case for women. Although it is likely that a proportion of the unemployed females were voluntarily unemployed because of domestic duties, nevertheless, their being outside the paid workforce, and their lacking economic independence, indicates increased vulnerability.

Only four victims were classified as being in the professional/managerial occupational category. This tends to support Najman's conclusion from his study of homicides recorded throughout Australia in 1965-67, that the risk of homicide victimisation varies inversely with occupational status: the risk of becoming a victim of homicide is considerably greater with in the lowest occupational categories (Najman 1980).

Country of birth. Country of birth was not recorded for nearly a half of all victims. Of the remainder, 80 per cent were known to be Australian-born, and the rest were from a total of fourteen other countries. In general, numbers were too small to discern anything of particular interest concerning overseas-born victims, although patterns may emerge over time.

Racial appearance. Table 9 shows racial appearance of victims in each jurisdiction: information was not available in 23 per cent of cases.

Table 9: Racial Appearance of Victim by Jurisdiction, Australia 1989-90

<i>Racial Appearance</i>	<i>Jurisdiction</i>								<i>%</i>
	<i>NSW</i>	<i>VIC</i>	<i>QLD</i>	<i>WA</i>	<i>SA</i>	<i>TAS</i>	<i>NT</i>	<i>AUST</i>	
White	37	64	50	18	17	6	5	197	60
Aboriginal	1	-	13	8	1	-	15	38	12
Other	8	5	2	2	1	-	-	18	5
Unknown	58	10	6	-	2	1	-	77	23
Total	104	79	71	28	21	7	20	330	100
Victims	32%	24%	22%	8%	6%	2%	6%	100%	

The most notable aspect of this table is that, although Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders make up only 1.5 per cent of the total Australian population, they constitute at least 12 per cent of all homicide victims (in these data, the term 'Aboriginals' includes Torres Strait Islanders).

When Aboriginal vulnerability is assessed by jurisdiction, it is even more dramatic. According to the 1986 Census, Aboriginals made up 2.4 per cent of the population of Queensland, 2.7 per cent of Western Australia and 22 per cent of the Northern Territory. The proportion of Aboriginal homicide victims in each of these jurisdictions in 1989-90 was at least 18 per cent, 29 per cent and 75 per cent respectively.

Although the Aboriginal homicide figures for the Northern Territory are high, proportionately the figures for Queensland and Western Australia are even more noteworthy. For Queensland the rate is in excess of seven times that to be expected from population data; for Western Australia it is eleven times.

Aboriginal women are at significantly higher risk of homicide than white women (though the risk is not as great as it is for Aboriginal men). While the risk overall for males is double that for females, for Aboriginals it is about 1.3:1 (42 per cent of all Aboriginal victims were women).

There was a total of ten incidents, involving a total of 11 offenders, where the offender was Aboriginal and the victim white. In some of these the Aboriginal was one of several offenders involved, the remainder being white. None of these incidents appeared to be racially motivated and they were spread across most jurisdictions. There were a further two incidents with an Aboriginal victim and a white offender, which likewise did not appear to be racially motivated. Table 10 illustrates the breakdown of victim-offender pairs by appearance. It shows that Australian homicide is overwhelmingly intra-racial.

Table 10: Appearance of Victim and Offender Pairs, Australia 1989-90

<i>Victim Appearance</i>	<i>Offender Appearance</i>			
	<i>White</i>	<i>Aboriginal</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Unknown</i>
White	194	11	3	10
Aboriginal	2	39	-	-
Other	7	2	9	1
Unknown	19	1	-	61

Alcohol/drug use. Information concerning whether or not victims were under the influence of alcohol or drugs was available in fewer than half of all cases: particular caution is therefore needed in interpreting these data. It is nevertheless significant that for those cases where this was recorded, 60 per cent of males and a

third of females were affected by alcohol. Where it was recorded, nearly half of white victims and over 80 per cent of Aboriginal victims were under the influence of alcohol (only 24 per cent of whites and 13 per cent of Aboriginals were recorded as definitely not under the influence of alcohol or drugs).

It is evident that alcohol influence is closely correlated with homicidal violence. The influence of other drugs was not significant; fewer than 4 per cent of victims were known to be so affected.

Criminal history. Criminal records were not available for nearly half of all victims, so all results must be regarded with extreme caution. Nevertheless, of those cases where criminal history was available, 31 per cent of victims had a criminal record and 16 per cent had violent criminal histories, two of them for homicide offences. It appears that a significantly higher proportion of Aboriginal than white victims had criminal histories.

The Offender

We now turn to consider those characteristics of offenders which appear to increase the likelihood of their being involved in homicide incidents.

Sex. Table 11 illustrates the spread of offenders over age and sex categories.

Table 11: Age of Offender by Sex, Number and Rate per 100,000 Population, Australia 1989-90

<i>Sex of Offender</i>	<i>Age of Offender</i>							<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
	<i>0-19</i>	<i>20-29</i>	<i>30-39</i>	<i>40-49</i>	<i>50-59</i>	<i>60+</i>	<i>Unkwn</i>		
M	44 ^(1.7)	105 ^(7.5)	54 ^(4.0)	35 ^(3.2)	20 ^(2.6)	7 ^(0.6)	23	288 ^(3.4)	86
F	4 ^(0.2)	21 ^(1.5)	9 ^(0.7)	4 ^(0.4)	1 ^(0.1)	1 ^(0.1)	2	42 ^(0.5)	13
Unkwn	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	5	1
Total	48 ^(0.9) 14%	126 ^(4.6) 38%	63 ^(2.4) 19%	39 ^(1.8) 12%	21 ^(1.4) 6%	8 ^(0.3) 2%	30 9%	335 ^(2.0) 100%	100

The ratio of male to female offenders is about 7:1 overall, although it varies considerably between age groups. Of the 48 homicides committed by persons under the age of twenty, only four (8 per cent) involved female offenders. The disparity between the sexes remains great in every age group thereafter.

As Table 2 shows, the ratio of male to female offenders is fairly uniform across all jurisdictions at about 7:1, except for the Northern Territory where it increases to over 9:1.

Age. Table 11 shows that for both males and females, more offenders were in the 20-29 age group than any other, while the second largest age group was 30-39. Together, these two groups account for well over half of all male offenders and 70 percent of all females. Likelihood of offending diminishes steeply after 30. This pattern is similar across all jurisdictions.

Marital status. Marital status was not known for a quarter of all offenders. Of those where marital status was known, two-thirds were single or no longer married; nearly twice as many females as males were known to be married or in a de facto relationship

(53 per cent compared with 33 per cent). This may indicate that the fact of being in a marital relationship is significant in terms of the kinds of homicides committed by women.

Employment. The employment status of a third of offenders was not recorded. Of the remainder, and excluding those for whom employment was not applicable (those too old or too young to be in the workforce, together with pensioners), just over half of both male and female offenders were unemployed: only 22 per cent of males and 17 per cent of females were known to be in employment. Only three were classified as being in the professional/managerial occupational category.

Country of birth. Country of birth was not recorded for a third of offenders. Of the remainder, 82 per cent were known to be Australian-born and the rest were from a further 14 countries. No particular country was over represented, though patterns may emerge over time.

Racial appearance. Table 12 shows racial appearance of offenders in each jurisdiction; it was not recorded in 20 per cent of cases.

Table 12: Racial Appearance of Offenders by Jurisdiction, Australia 1989-90

<i>Racial Appearance</i>	<i>Jurisdiction</i>								
	<i>NSW</i>	<i>VIC</i>	<i>QLD</i>	<i>WA</i>	<i>SA</i>	<i>TAS</i>	<i>NT</i>	<i>AUST</i>	<i>%</i>
White	42	67	60	15	14	5	2	205	61
Aboriginal	4	17	8	5	-	17	51	15	
Other	7	3	-	1	-	-	-	11	3
Unknown	55	8	1	-	3	1	-	68	20
Total	108	78	78	24	22	6	19	335	100
Offenders	32%	23%	23%	7%	7%	2%	6%	100%	

As was the case for the corresponding victims table (Table 9), the most obvious feature of this table is the overrepresentation of Aboriginal offenders: 15 per cent of all offenders and 12 per cent of all victims were Aboriginal. This could be anticipated, given the low incidence of inter-racial homicide in Australia: fewer than five per cent of incidents were between Aboriginals and other races, and none of these gave any indication of being racially motivated.

The picture which emerges of Aboriginal offenders in each jurisdiction mirrors that relating to victims: 22 per cent in Queensland (18 per cent of victims), 33 per cent in Western Australia (29 per cent of victims) and 89 per cent in the Northern Territory (75 per cent of victims).

Aboriginal women have a higher rate of homicide offending than white women: for the whole population of offenders the male rate is about seven times the female rate, but for the Aboriginal offending population the male rate is about five times the female rate. Sixteen per cent of all Aboriginal offenders were women compared with 12 per cent for the whole offending population.

Alcohol/drug use. Alcohol/drug influence was not recorded for half of all offenders, so again results must be viewed with particular caution. Of those offenders where it was recorded, the following observations could be made:

- over 70 per cent of males and over 65 per cent of females were alcohol-affected at the time of the incident.
- in the 20-29 and 30-39 age groups, about 80 per cent were alcohol-affected.
- 70 per cent of white offenders and 86 per cent of Aboriginal offenders were alcohol-affected (only 14 per cent of white offenders and 8 per cent of Aboriginal offenders were known definitely not to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs).

The influence of drugs other than alcohol was recorded in only 3 per cent of offenders.

Criminal history. Criminal histories were unknown for a third of all offenders; of the remainder, 75 per cent were known to have a previous criminal record. Of these 165 individuals, only 19 (12 per cent) were women.

Nearly half of those offenders with criminal records had violent criminal histories (10 percent of these were women). They include six offenders who had previously been convicted of homicide; of these, two were at the time of the offence serving sentences for murder and were accused of murdering a fellow prisoner, another was serving a prison sentence for serial murders, two of which are included in these data, and the remaining three offended after their release from prison for previous homicide convictions.

The most common prior conviction for those with a violent history was serious assault: of the 91 offenders with a violent history, 37 (40 per cent) had such a conviction.

Murder-suicide. It is important to note that in 25 incidents (8 per cent of the total), the offender committed suicide prior to arrest; only two of these were female and none was Aboriginal.

Relationship between Victim and Offender

The primary relationship between victim and offender in each jurisdiction was unknown in 22 per cent of cases (see Table 13).

Table 13: Victim Jurisdiction by Primary Relationship, Australia 1989-90

Victim	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	NT	AUST	%
Spouse	17	20	15	13	3	1	5	74	22
Parent-Child	10	8	6	5	-	3	-	32	10
Other Family	2	1	2	1	2	1	4	13	4
Friends	24	28	31	5	6	1	6	101	31
Strangers	9	5	7	2	6	1	-	30	9
Other	1	2	6	-	-	-	-	9	3
Unknown	41	15	4	2	4	-	5	71	22
Total	104	79	71	28	21	7	20	330	100
Victims	32%	24%	22%	8%	6%	2%	6%	100%	

Of those cases where the relationship was known, 29 per cent of homicides were between spouses (both married and de facto). When the data is disaggregated by race, it is possible to see the enhanced risk for Aboriginals here: 25 per cent of white victims and just under half of Aboriginal victims were killed by their spouses.

It is worth noting that Western Australia had a higher proportion of spousal homicides than other jurisdictions during 1989-90: just under half of their homicides were between spouses. This finding may be related to the higher than expected proportion of female victims in Western Australia. It may be no more than a random fluctuation, but is worthy of special attention to observe any pattern over time.

Parent-child relationships (which includes child-parent and adult child-parent homicides) together with other family relationships accounted for a further 17 per cent of the total cases where relationship was known, and again the Western Australian figure appears higher than other jurisdictions on this occasion.

'Domestic' homicides, that is, those occurring between family members, accounted for 36 per cent of all homicides where relationship was recorded. Aboriginality represents an important risk factor in all such homicides, not just spousal killings: these homicides account for 40 per cent of those involving white victims and 70 per cent of those involving Aboriginal victims. Homicide between people known to each other but outside the family accounted for a further third for both groups.

Of those cases where the relationship was recorded, stranger killings accounted for at least 15 per cent of homicides where the victim was white, but interestingly, none where the victim was Aboriginal. Overall, for 12 per cent of victims the offender was known to be a stranger to them.

For 22 per cent of victims, the relationship with the offender was unknown: some of these are incidents where the relationship was not recorded, while others are unsolved cases. One would expect a proportion of both of these to involve strangers also.

Characteristics Shared by Victims and Offenders

Given that such a high proportion of victims and offenders were known to one another, it is perhaps not surprising that they share a number of features in common. When we compare them we find that in a high proportion of cases both were of the same sex and race, had the same marital status and employment status, were under the influence of alcohol and were of similar age:

- where race was white or Aboriginal, 95 per cent of all victim-offender pairs were the same race.
- where employment status was known and applicable, that is, excluding children, students, pensioners and the retired, 70 per cent of all pairs had the same status.
- where marital status was known, 70 per cent had the same status.
- where alcohol influence was known, 63 per cent were both alcohol-affected. (For 20 per cent of pairs, neither were alcohol affected; for the remaining 17 per cent, one or other of the pair was alcohol affected).
- where sex was known, 60 per cent of all pairs were the same sex (nearly always male).
- for more than one-third of all pairs, both parties were aged between 20 and 39. For 60 per cent of all pairs, one of the parties was in this age group.

Patterns of Homicide

Based on the foregoing data, it is possible to identify clusters of characteristics frequently found in certain kinds of homicide incidents.

Intimate-domestic homicides. The data presented here confirm earlier research on homicide in Australia that a significant proportion of homicides occurs between people who have been in a close relationship, that is, existing or former sexual relationships and family relationships (Wallace 1986; Polk & Ransom 1990).

A particular feature of these data concerns the number of homicides which seem to occur at the time a partner in a sexual/conjugal relationship leaves or threatens to leave the relationship. The offender in such cases is almost always the male partner, and his suicide follows not infrequently. The children of the relationship sometimes are victims as well. A high proportion of these kinds of homicides are committed with firearms – a much higher proportion than other kinds of domestic homicides. This may imply a greater degree of premeditation than is usually associated with domestic killings.

These observations must, as always, be tempered by the knowledge that the data refer to homicides in only one year, and that the numbers are small. Nevertheless, it is extremely important to look carefully at this apparent pattern in homicide: it may have ramifications, for example, for welfare and support services and in the operation of the Family Court.

It is unfortunate that because police records in most jurisdictions do not refer to previous episodes of domestic violence when reporting domestic homicides, it has not been possible to establish whether a correlation exists between this form of homicide and pre-existing violence in the relationship. It is likely that a special study of these particular incidents, especially those resulting in the deaths of children and/or the offender, would be immensely useful in determining whether intervention or support for both partners at the time of the termination of the relationship, would prevent similar tragedies. Such a study, which would seek to use data from welfare and other organisations to supplement police records, is presently being considered by the Australian Institute of Criminology.

Confrontations between peers. A significant number of homicides – around 30 per cent – occurs between friends or long-term acquaintances. These tend to be males aged between 20 and 39, frequently unemployed, and their altercations are often over apparently trivial matters when both are affected by alcohol. Such homicides seemed to be particularly commonplace in Queensland, where nearly half of all homicides were between long-term acquaintances, many of them in such circumstances.

These homicides tend to occur in an unpremeditated way. If a weapon is involved it is nearly always a knife, though frequently death results from a physical fight, and frequently it appears to be a matter of chance as to which of the participants is the victim and which the offender. Indeed, there may be countless confrontations of this kind around Australia every night of the year, but the 'king hit' or unlucky strike that causes death occurs relatively infrequently.

These findings support the observations of Polk and Ransom (1990) concerning confrontational homicides between male peers, which they describe as typically occurring in leisure scenes, frequently involving alcohol and evolving around concepts of 'face' and honour.

Aboriginal homicide. Homicide in Aboriginal communities needs special comment not because it differs in character from homicide elsewhere – indeed such homicides appear almost entirely to fall into one of the two categories above – but rather because of the sheer volume.

To speak of a deep-seated and self-destructive malaise in many Aboriginal communities is not to make a new observation. The high levels of violence in some of these communities has been known for a long time, but has not been regularly and reliably quantified. Indeed, the National Committee on Violence was informed by a senior officer of the then Department of Aboriginal Affairs that the lack of data in the area of violence, particularly in relation to violence against women, made it difficult to assess the true extent of the problem and to begin to put solutions in place (address to meeting of National Committee on Violence, 14 October 1989).

Throughout Australia, Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders represent 1.5 per cent of the population and 1.1 per cent of the population over the age of 17 – the group most at risk of offending. In 1989-90 they represented at least 12 per cent of homicide victims and 15 per cent of homicide offenders.

Tables 9 and 12 show the numbers of Aboriginal victims and offenders in each jurisdiction in 1989-90: the vast majority of incidents involving Aboriginals occurred in Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

Although these figures are most noteworthy, they must be treated with caution in terms of generalising about the nature of Aboriginal violence. Homicides involving Aboriginals occur in communities still maintaining traditional authority structures where payback killings may take place based on traditional rules rather than on simple revenge; incidents also occur at long-established settlements such as Yuendumu and Arukun, on the fringes of regional centres such as Broome and Rockhampton and in major metropolitan areas.

Almost all Aboriginal homicide is alcohol-related, and drinking is a problem for most Aboriginal communities: the homicides occurring in these communities could fairly be said to represent the iceberg-tip of violence there.

It is impossible to generalise from one year's figures about patterns in Aboriginal homicide throughout Australia. It is, however, imperative in terms of policy options for reliable data to be available on which to base such options.

Conclusion

The analysis of data relating to homicides which occurred throughout Australia in 1989-90 suggests that there are a number of elements associated with the incidents themselves and the victims and offenders involved in them which indicate enhanced risk.

Incidents occurred most frequently in suburban locations in the victim's own home, on a Friday or Saturday night. The participants most often knew one another, sometimes cohabited, and the factor which precipitated the incident was frequently a domestic altercation between intimates or family members, or an altercation between peers over apparently trivial matters. The cause of death was almost always a firearm, a knife or similar implement, or an assault.

There were a number of demographic characteristics associated with risk of homicide shared by victims and offenders alike. For both groups, the majority were males aged in their twenties, single, Australian-born and unemployed. Aboriginality was also an important risk factor. Both were often alcohol affected at the time of the incident, and either or both may have had a criminal record.

This summary and the description of patterns in homicide which preceded it must be viewed cautiously, however. Despite similarities in these incidents which permit a certain amount of generalisation, every investigating police officer will affirm that each homicide is unique. Each one results from the complex interaction of various factors – psychological, social and cultural – taken together with the participants' life experiences and the circumstances in which the participants find themselves. The most that can be achieved from the foregoing analysis is to identify those factors which put individuals at special risk either of victimisation or offending, and the circumstances in which those individuals are most likely to be at risk. It is important to bear in mind, however, that the risk of homicide for anyone in Australia is very small: in public health terms, homicide is not a leading cause of death, even for Aboriginals, who are the section of the population at highest risk.

An unknown number of homicides are inevitable, or at least not amenable to any public policy measure aimed at prevention.

The task is to examine all measurable aspects of homicide incidents and the characteristics of those involved in them, so that strategies may be devised to lessen the risks associated with such individuals and such circumstances and thus discover how these lives may be saved.

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