



No. 73

Youth as Victims and Offenders of Homicide

Carlos Carcach

The material presented here comes from the database of the Homicide Monitoring Program at the Australian Institute of Criminology. The database covers 2226 homicide incidents involving 2415 victims and 2650 offenders over a seven-year period (1989-96). Twenty-eight per cent of all victims of homicides were aged below 25 years, and 35 per cent of offenders were also below 25. In general, young people who kill, kill people of the same age and racial group as themselves.

This paper focuses on youth homicide which is perhaps the most costly of all forms of violence. Patterns of homicide among people under 25 are very different to those over 25. Young people who kill are more likely than older people to kill strangers. Whereas homicides by older people are likely to be the result of a relationship problem, homicides by young people are primarily the result of altercations, or occur in the course of other crimes. Young people use firearms much less than older people.

The killing of a young person represents the loss of many years of potentially productive, active life, not to mention the short and medium-term impact on families, the community and the society as a whole. The imprisonment of a young perpetrator of homicide also entails high costs to society.

This paper examines these issues, and is the first of a new round of reports on the seven-year data set.

Adam Graycar
Director

This paper examines the most salient features of homicides involving youth. The term "youth" includes juveniles (aged 10-17 years), those in their late teens (aged 18-20 years), and young adults (aged 21-24 years). It attempts to uncover the main factors associated with youth involvement in homicide by analysing the characteristics of victims, offenders and the relations between them. It also compares youth and older people involvement in homicide. The analysis is based on data held as part of the Homicide Monitoring Program at the Australian Institute of Criminology. It covers all the homicides occurring in Australia during the period from 1 July 1989 to 30 June 1996.

Previous research suggests that homicides involving youth differ in many respects from those involving older persons. Relational and locational factors operate differently according to the age of the persons involved in homicides. Homicides involving youth are usually the result of altercations between strangers, friends or acquaintances. As age increases, homicides are more likely to involve persons in intimate relationships and family members. Although most homicides tend to occur in residential premises (James & Carcach 1997), those involving youth often have a fair chance of occurring in pubs, on the street or other open areas. Research also suggests that a substantial proportion of nonfamilial juvenile homicides are incidental to some sort of theft crime committed on strangers or acquaintances. Non-juvenile homicides meanwhile, are more likely to be the result of altercations

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between persons known to each other. Finally, as the social distance between victim and offender increases, juvenile homicides tend to involve multiple offenders (see Ewing 1990).

The main results indicate that:

- Youth are the offenders or victims of about one-third of the homicides occurring in Australia. A salient feature of Australian youth homicide is its male character. Over the past 7 years, male victims have outnumbered females by around 2 to 1. For offenders, the male-female ratio approaches 10:1.
- Among youth, the late teens (18-20 years old) and young adults (21-24 years old) are the groups with highest risk of becoming victims or offenders of homicide.
- Perpetrators of Australian homicides tend to belong to the same racial group as their victims. This is the case with youth homicide as well.
- Youth homicide tends to occur between unrelated persons; with juvenile offenders (10-17 year old) showing the largest incidence of stranger homicides. Homicides on acquaintances are more frequent among the late teens.
- About one-third of all homicide offenders and one-sixth of the victims have a previous criminal record. As expected, the proportion of offenders and victims with a previous criminal history is lowest among juveniles; whereas it is highest among the late teens and young adults.
- Over one-third of offenders and victims of homicide are under the influence of alcohol at the time of the incident. Youth aged 18 to 24 years show the highest incidence of involvement in alcohol-related homicide, as both offenders and as victims.

Figure 1: AUSTRALIA, Victims of homicide: Age-specific rates, 1989-96

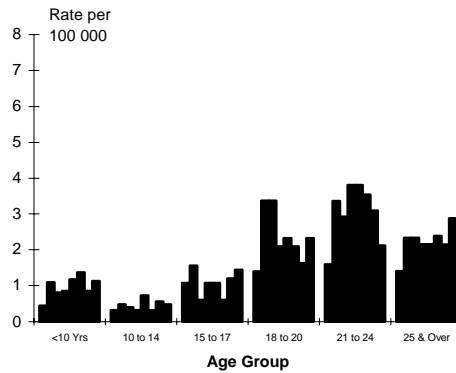
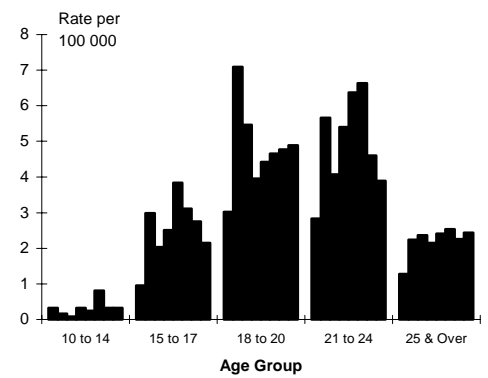


Figure 2: AUSTRALIA, Offenders of homicide: Age-specific rates, 1989-96



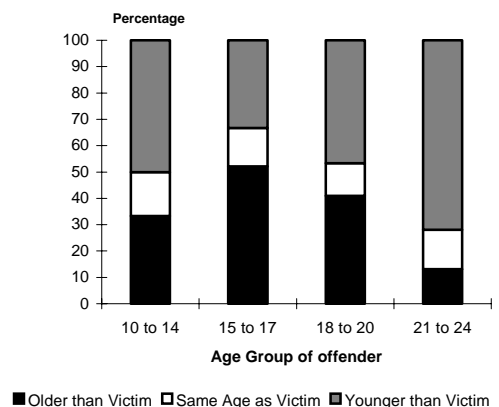
- Homicides perpetrated by two or more offenders acting together tend to be more frequent among juveniles, especially for homicides occurring during the course of other crimes, particularly robbery. “Hate” killings are relatively rare in Australia.
- Homicides occurring in pubs and related environments are more likely to involve young offenders. It is, however, important to remember that over half of youth homicides occur at the victim’s or the offender’s home.
- Youth homicides are primarily the result of altercations or occur in the course of other crimes such as robbery, sexual assault, arson or child abuse. Although not the dominant cause of homicide, revenge homicides are more frequent among juveniles than other age groups.
- Young offenders tend to make less use of firearms than their adult counterparts. They tend to use sharp or blunt instruments and assault (with fists and/or feet).

years. Age-specific rates of offending peak at ages between 18 and 20 years and remain fairly stable up to a point in the 21-24 age group. Both rates experience a decline for ages over 24 years. Rates of offending are higher than rates of becoming victims across all ages (see Figures 1 and 2). Young age is a primary factor associated with violence, and youth homicides usually involve more offenders than victims.

Perpetrators tend to select victims perceived by them as “soft targets”. In general, young offenders (aged less than 25 years) tend to be older than their victims. On the other hand, offenders aged 25 years and over tend to be younger than their victims.

Analysis of homicides when both victim and offender are young portrays a different picture. Except for offenders aged

Figure 3: AUSTRALIA, Homicide: Percentage of youth offenders by age group, according to whether they are older, younger or the same age as youth victims, 1989-96

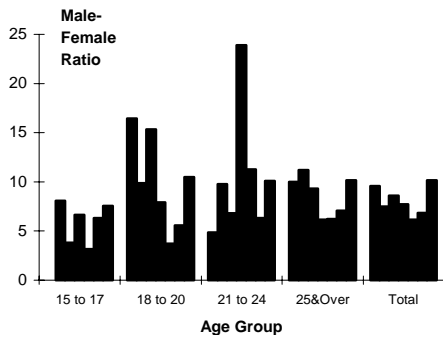


Characteristics of Youth Involved in Homicide

Age

Youth involvement in homicide varies with age. The rate of victimisation increases with age and peaks between 21 and 24 years, declining for ages over 25

Figure 4: AUSTRALIA, Homicide: Ratio of male to female age-specific rates of offending, 1989-96



15 to 17 who tend to kill older youth victims, those in the remaining age groups tend to kill young victims who are either of their same age or younger (see Figure 3). These results are consistent with US findings (see Goetting 1993).

Homicides involving youth and those involving adults differ with regard to the relationship between offender's and victim's age.

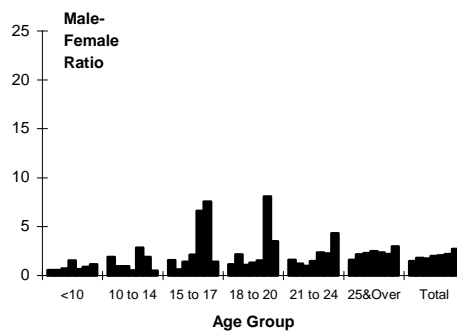
In addition, there are differences *between* youth homicides in this respect. Juveniles are more likely than older offenders to be involved in homicides which result from altercations between strangers, and these incidents are often incidental to robberies or thefts. As offenders become older, homicides are more likely to involve victims who are known to them.

Gender

Males are much more likely than females to perpetrate homicide. However, for the 18 to 20 year age group, the rate of female offending seems to be increasing more rapidly than male offending. For example, in 1993, there were 23 male offenders for each female offender aged 21 to 24. This is an extreme case, as in other years the ratio of male to female offending rates was between 5 and 10 (see Figure 4).

With the exception of those aged less than 10 years, males are also more likely than females to be victims of homicide. Apart from a few extremes observed

Figure 5: AUSTRALIA, Homicide: Ratio of male to female age-specific rates of victimisation, 1989-96

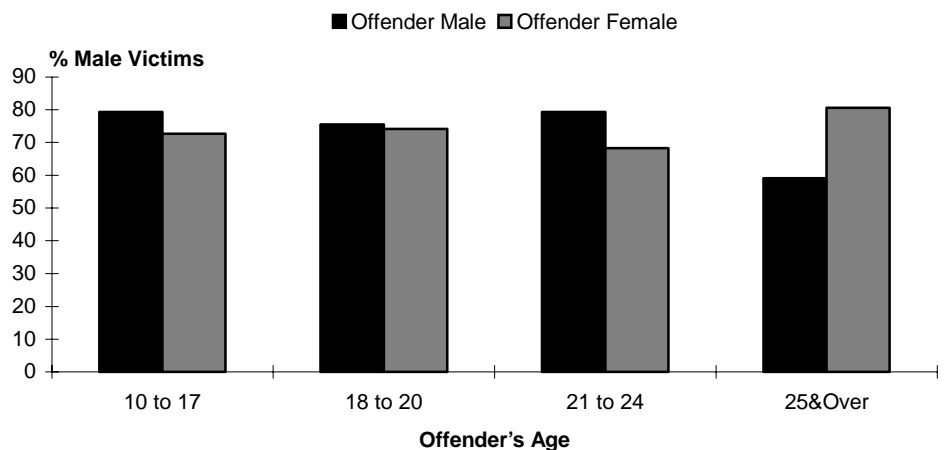


during 1995 and 1996, there were about 2 male victims for each female victim (see Figure 5). While the male relative risk of victimisation has remained generally stable for juveniles (10-17 years), it seems to have increased for the late teens (18-20 years) and young adults (21-24 years).

Young males are more likely to be involved in homicide than older males. Nine out of 10 young offenders (aged 10-24 years) and 75 per cent of young victims were males. By contrast, among those aged 25 years and over, 78 per cent of offenders and 60 per cent of victims were males. Young males have a greater chance of being the victims of homicide than their older counterparts.

Males are more likely than females to be victims of homicide, irrespective of the gender and age of the perpetrator. Among incidents with male perpetrators,

Figure 6: AUSTRALIA, Percentage of homicides with male victims: Gender and age of offenders, 1989-96



the proportion of male victims decreases as the age of the offender increases. By contrast, for incidents with a female perpetrator, the percentage of male victims increases as the offender's age increases (see Figure 6). Older female offenders are more likely to be involved in intimate partner homicide than young female offenders.

Racial Appearance

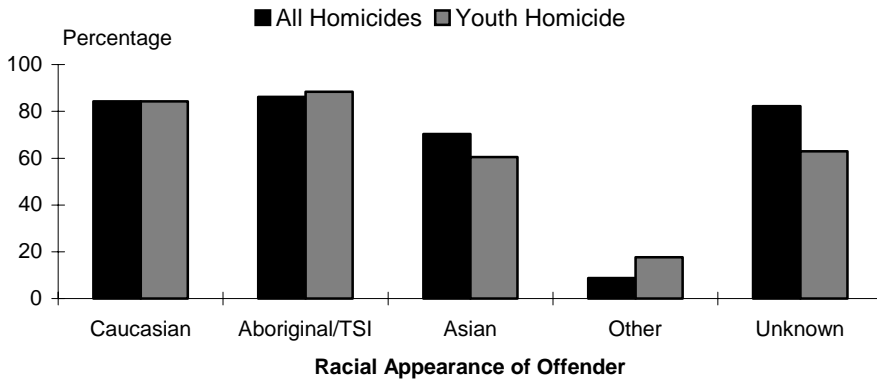
The racial appearance of offenders and victims is assessed from perceptions of police officers; this is an imperfect measure for such important concepts as race and ethnicity, which are often associated with differential patterns in victimisation and offending behaviour. Nevertheless, data from the Homicide Monitoring Program are still useful in establishing some general patterns.

Homicides in Australia tend to occur between persons of similar racial appearance (see Figure 7). Homicides involving youth are not different in this regard from those among persons aged over 24 years.

Victim-Offender Relationship

Youth homicide tends to occur between unrelated persons. The younger the offender, the larger the percentage of victims that are either strangers or acquaintances. On the other hand, **homicide**

Figure 7: AUSTRALIA, Percentage of homicides with victims and offenders having the same racial appearance, 1989-96

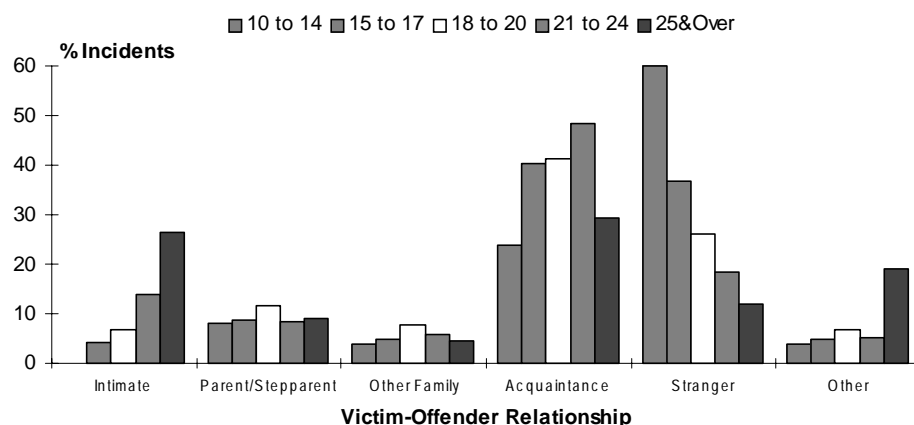


involving persons in intimate relationships tends to increase with offender's age (see Figure 8).

For a long time, research on juvenile homicide focused on youths who kill a parent or another family member. However, the data show that only in 1 out of 6 incidents the relationship between victim and offender was familial.

Among males, juvenile offenders (10-17 years old) tend to commit more homicides on strangers. Young adults (18-24 years old) are more likely to victimise friends or acquaintances. Adult offenders (25 years and over) tend to kill family members (intimate, parent/stepparent or other relatives). The pattern of victim selection among female offenders aged 10 to 17 years mirrored that for males in the 18-24 year group. Young adult females (18-24 years old) showed the same pattern as adult males (25 years and over). Finally, most of the homicides involving a female

Figure 8: AUSTRALIA, Percentage of homicides by offender-victim relationship according to age of offenders, 1989-96



offender aged 25 years and over were committed on a family member.

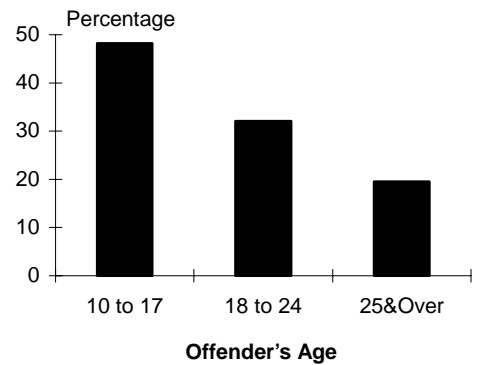
Previous Criminal History

One-third of all offenders and over one-sixth of all victims had a previous criminal history; which suggests that a **relatively low proportion of those involved in homicide had previous experiences with crime**. Over 1 in 3 of all offenders and over 1 in 4 of all victims with a previous criminal record, had a history of involvement with violent crimes (homicide, assault, sexual assault and armed robbery). Youth offenders and youth victims were not statistically different from their adult counterparts in these respects.

Alcohol Consumption and Homicide

Thirty-four per cent of all offenders and 31 per cent of all victims of homicide were under

Figure 9: AUSTRALIA, Percentage of homicides with multiple offenders: Age of offender, 1989-96



the influence of alcohol, at the time of the incident (see Table 1).

Among juveniles and adults the percentage of persons under the influence of alcohol was very similar to the national average. The largest incidence of alcohol-related homicides was observed for young adults, both victims and offenders.

Homicides with Multiple Offenders

About 2 out of 5 of all homicides were perpetrated by more than one offender. Consistent with theoretical expectations, the percentage of incidents with multiple offenders decreased with offenders' age (see Figure 9).

Juvenile homicides are often without motive. Although some juvenile killers kill for reasons that might seem understandable, as in the case when an abused child kills abusive parents, many juvenile homicides can only be described as senseless. Among others, this includes killings that have been categorised as "thrill" killings (see Ewing 1990).

Homicides are often committed in the course of other crimes. Killings in the process of robbery are more likely than others to involve multiple

Table 1: AUSTRALIA, Percentage of homicides where offenders or victims were under the influence of alcohol, 1989-96

Age Group	Offender	Victim
10 to 17	29.0	29.6
18 to 24	43.9	37.0
25&Over	30.8	28.2
Total	34.2	30.6

Table 2: AUSTRALIA, Percentage and number of multiple offender homicides, within each age group, where the incident originated from a robbery or sexual assault, 1989-96

Age group	Robbery		Sexual Assault	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
	% (No.)	% (No.)	% (No.)	% (No.)
10-17	63.5 (52)	41.8 (134)	60.0 (5)	47.5 (181)
18-24	59.1 (88)	28.8 (631)	25.0 (28)	32.9 (691)
25&Over	37.0 (135)	16.0 (1612)	14.0 (62)	17.7 (1685)
Total	49.1 (275)	20.8 (2377)	20.0 (95)	23.9 (2557)

Note. Number in brackets = no. of offenders.

offenders. About half of all robbery related homicides were committed by more than one offender. There was no significant difference between the percentages for juveniles and young adults (see Table 2).

Table 2 also shows that overall, only 1 out of 5 sexual assaults resulting in homicides were committed by multiple offenders. The small number of this type of killing precludes any meaningful comparisons between age groups or with killings not related to sexual assault.

The data indicate that killings by reason of the victim's race (a form of "hate" killing) are rare. In most homicides with more than one offender, the victim and the offenders were identified as Caucasian (see Table 3). This is a similar pattern to that observed for single-offender incidents.

The proportion of homicides committed by multiple offenders where the victim was an acquaintance tended to increase with age. Over half of the homicides involving multiple offenders aged over 18 years were committed on an acquaintance. On the other hand, **the percentage of**

both family and stranger homicides committed by more than one offender decreases as age increases (see Table 3).

Location of Incidents

Over 8 out of 10 homicides occurred in urban areas. The distribution of incidents according to type of area was invariant to age. The data suggest, however, differences in the distribution of the specific location of homicides, according to offender's age. This gives support to the hypothesis that location of incidents may be associated with differential patterns of offender's routine activities (see Figure 10).

Over half of the incidents occurred at the victim or offender's home. The older the offender the greater the likelihood of homicides occurring in private locations. Homicides occurring in pubs or related environments are more likely to involve juveniles (10-17 years old) and their incidence tends to decrease with age.

Context of Youth Homicide

Among juvenile offenders (10-17

Table 3: AUSTRALIA, Percentage of homicides involving multiple offenders within each category defined according to offender's age and racial appearance of victims or victim-offender relationship, 1989-96

Offenders' Age	Racial Appearance of Victims ¹				Victim-Offender Relationship ¹			
	Caucasian	Aboriginal/TSI	Asian	Other	Family ²	Acquaintance	Stranger	Other
10-17 (89)	74.2	10.1	7.9	6.7	16.0	38.2	55.1	2.2
18-24 (234)	78.2	8.5	4.7	5.1	11.2	54.3	31.2	5.1
25 & Over (313)	81.2	6.7	5.1	3.8	5.8	57.8	19.2	9.9

1. Excludes unknown.

2. Includes intimate, parent/stepparent and other family.

Note. Numbers in brackets = no. of incidents with multiple offenders.

years), the predominant factor was homicide incidental to other crimes; followed by altercations. The same factors seem to have contributed to most of the homicides committed by young adult offenders (18-24 years), although in reverse order of importance.

Juvenile offenders contributed the greatest proportion of homicides associated with revenge and homicides in the course of other crimes. Homicides resulting from altercations were more frequent among young adults. Adults had the largest percentage of intimate homicides (see Table 4).

Methods of Killing

Australians are most concerned with the reduction of firearm related violence and all governments have taken steps towards achieving this goal. A little less than one-quarter of all offenders used a firearm to kill their victims. Use of firearm varied with the age of offenders. The major incidence of firearm use was observed for adult offenders (aged 25 years and over) (see Table 5).

Firearms are not, however, the most common means of killing in Australia. Sharp and blunt instruments are the most used by offenders of all ages. Among adults, firearms come in second place. The second most frequent method of killing for juveniles and young adult offenders is assault (fists, feet, etc.).

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Youth involvement in homicide is, among other factors, the result of lifestyle and routine activity patterns. Youth tend to spend more time away from home and to visit places that offer increased risk of involvement in violence. From this perspective, the key to homicide prevention is to focus on the most dangerous situations and on

Table 4: AUSTRALIA, Percentage of homicides, age of offenders by precipitating factor, 1989-96

Precipitating Factor	Offender's Age			Total
	10 to 17	18 to 24	25&Over	
Intimate Nature	12.4	19.1	33.4	28.1
Altercation	19.4	24.6	15.8	18.4
Drugs/Money	5.9	8.5	8.1	8.1
Revenge	12.9	9.7	9.1	9.5
Incidental	33.9	20.9	14.0	17.2
Other	15.6	17.2	19.5	18.6
Total	100.0 (186)	100.0 (719)	100.0 (1747)	100.0 (2652)

Table 5: AUSTRALIA, Percentage of homicides by age of offenders by method of killing, 1989-96

Method of Killing	Offender's Age			Total
	10 to 17	18 to 24	25&Over	
Firearm	18.3	16.4	27.8	24.1
Sharp/Blunt Instrument	47.9	45.9	40.3	42.3
Assault	23.1	24.6	16.4	19.1
Other	10.7	13.1	15.5	14.5
Total	100.0 (186)	100.0 (719)	100.0 (1747)	100.0 (2652)

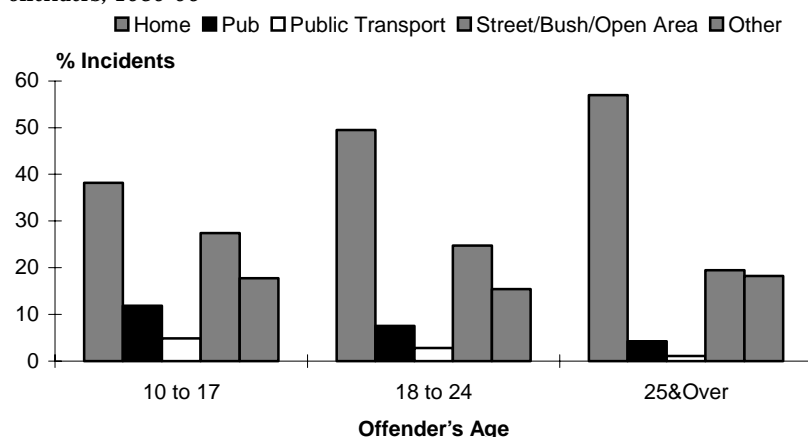
Note. Number in brackets = no. of offenders.

people who are at highest risk of victimisation. Increased police presence in places known to attract large numbers of young people, and the use of environmental design are among the many situational measures that can be implemented to prevent youth homicide. Innovative strategies to manage and control people's use of alcohol should be considered as an integral part of any program aimed at preventing violence.

There are many homicides involving young people (about half) that occur in the privacy of the victim's or the offender's home

which result from family disputes or other altercations. In many cases, minor disputes escalate to a fatal event. There are many situations when the roots of the problem are out of the home, perhaps at the workplace, the school; they may also entail external factors that are beyond individual control. Prevention of this type of incident is possible with programs aimed at increasing people's ability to deal with conflict and other difficult situations. Programs that improve parenting skills are relevant in this area, and the learning of skills needs to begin in primary school.

Figure 10: AUSTRALIA, Distribution of homicides according to location and age of offenders, 1989-96



It must be recognised that delinquency is associated with such other factors as poor parenting, low intelligence and poor educational achievement, having delinquent parents, and being a member of socially disadvantaged groups (see Tarling, 1993). Early identification and treatment of people with potentially high risks of offending is crucial to prevent violent crime.

The analysis contained in this paper does not go beyond the exploration of some statistical regularities; and as such, it raises more questions than it answers. However, by examining the experiences of those who have become killers or killed it is possible to improve our knowledge of the complexities involved in youth homicide, and hence to foster violence prevention.

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