

# HOMICIDE BETWEEN SEXUAL INTIMATES IN AUSTRALIA: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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WHEN A HOMICIDE OR A HOMICIDE/SUICIDE TAKES PLACE WITHIN THE HOME, it is not uncommon for concern to be aired from government, media, and other concerned agencies. Prevention models which stress the role of domestic violence as an antecedent and the importance of appropriate legislation and police enforcement are often suggested.

Yet, there has been little research done in Australia that has focused upon marital murder or killings between sexual intimates. Studies have been limited either by the broad scope of the topic (all homicides, *see* Strang 1991), sample selection (for example, only prosecuted cases: *see* Law Reform Commission of Victoria 1991a, 1991b), or the narrow scope of the topic (for example only women who kill their husbands: *see* Bacon & Lansdowne 1982), or the location (one state: *see* Rod 1979), or a combination of the above (*see* Wallace 1986, Bonney 1987, Polk & Ranson 1991a, 1991b). The works just cited do give an indication that many of these killing may be preceded by histories of battering, however more empirical data is needed prior to generating prevention programs.

The following paper represents the preliminary findings of a major research project conducted to provide more information about homicide between adult sexual intimates in Australia. Two data sets are being used in the year-long study:

- information on the sexual intimate homicide sub-set (all offenders/victims who were married, de facto, estranged or divorced) from the National Homicide Monitoring Program (1989-1991) housed at the Australian Institute of Criminology; and

- data collected on about 110 cases (1988–1990) in New South Wales and Victoria from coronial, court and Department of Public Prosecutions files. These cases do not represent all incidents of such homicides in those two states during the three-year period; therefore the findings may not be reflective of the total in the two states, or of the entire nation. For example, the nation-wide data indicate that *both* genders of Aboriginal people are disproportionately present as perpetrators in homicides between adult sexual intimates. Also, several offenders/victims described as current or former non-cohabiting boyfriends/girlfriends were included, since sexual intimacy had been part of the relationships.

Aside from the section immediately following, the material in this paper comes from these 110 homicides. There will be little if any theorising concerning the findings since these data are preliminary. A full discussion of the findings of both data sets will appear in another Australian Institute of Criminology publication. It must be stressed that these findings are both preliminary and based upon a limited sample size and time depth. All data should be interpreted in that light.

### **Homicide between Adult Sexual Intimates, Australia-Wide**

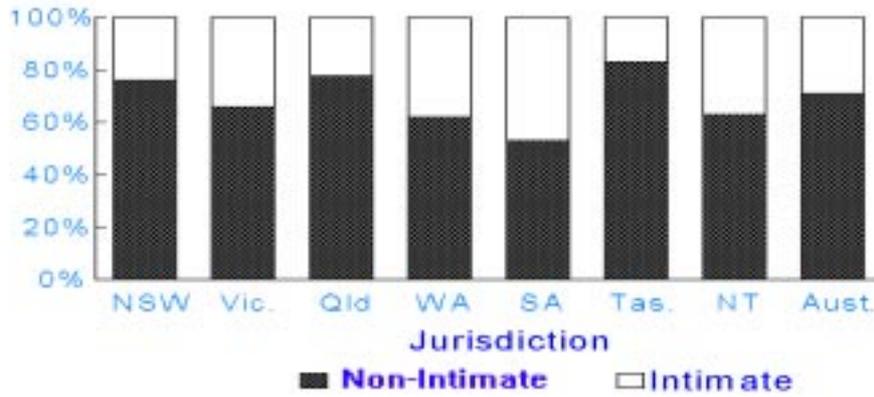
Of those incidents which occurred from July 1989 through June 1991 where the relationship between victim and offender was known, more than one-quarter (150 killings representing 29 per cent of the total) were between adult sexual intimates. However, the proportion of homicides which falls into this category varies by state, as shown in Figure 1.

A relatively low proportion of New South Wales' homicides appears to take place in the adult intimate context in comparison to most of the other states. However, as Figure 2 illustrates, almost one-quarter of killings between sexual intimates do take place in New South Wales. The highest number over the two year period (forty) occurred in Victoria.

The perpetrators of all homicides in Australia are overwhelmingly male: 9 per cent of the non-intimate perpetrators and 19 per cent of the killers in the intimate type are female. This represents distinct variation with studies in the USA which found near gender parity in 'marital murders' (Wolfgang 1956, 1958; Daly & Wilson 1988a, 1988b; Goetting 1987). Figure 3 illustrates the distribution by gender and by state.

Figure 1

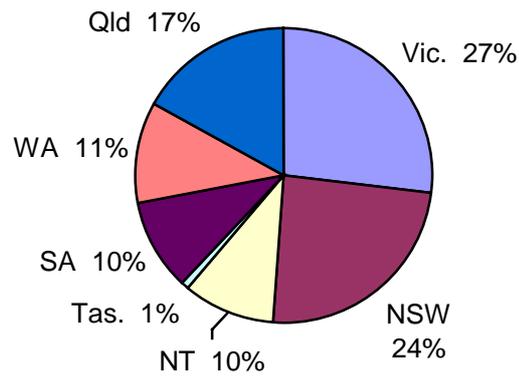
**Homicides in Australia 1989–91, % Intimate/Non-Intimate**



Note: 116 incidents are excluded since relationship was unknown.  
 Source: National Homicide Monitoring Program, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.

Figure 2

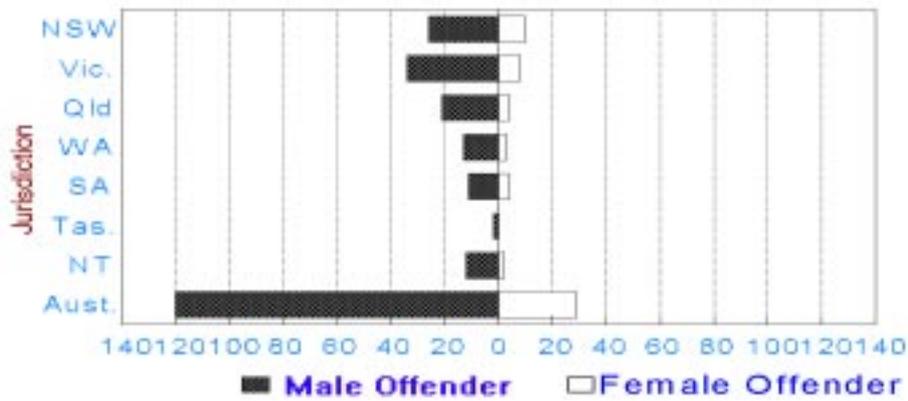
**Homicide Between Adult Sexual Intimates 1989–91, % by State**



Note: 116 cases are excluded since intimacy/non-intimacy was unknown.  
 Source: National Homicide Monitoring Program, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.

Figure 3

**Homicides Between Adult Sexual Intimates in Australia 1989–91  
Number by Gender and State**



Source: National Homicide Monitoring Program, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.

**Gender, Age and Ethnicity**

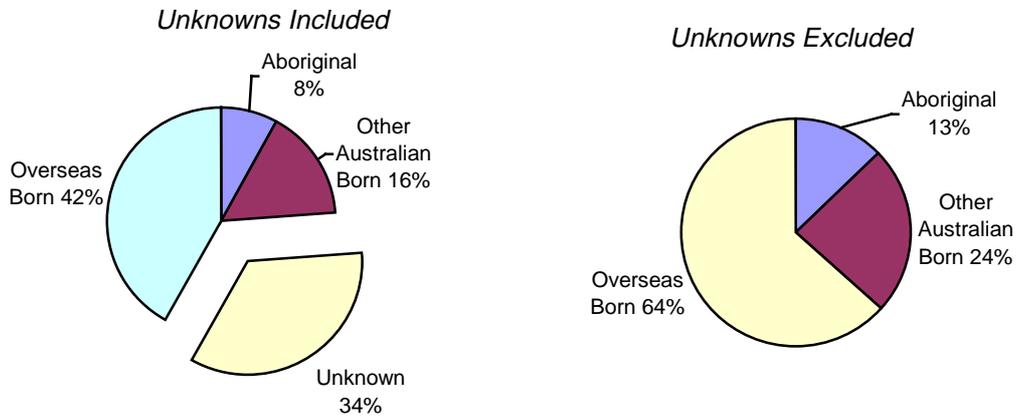
In the 110 New South Wales and Victorian incident sample, twenty-three of the perpetrators were female; however, two-thirds of the Aboriginal perpetrators were women. The mean age of offenders was forty years. For Aboriginal people the mean age was lower—thirty-two years—while migrants tended to be older at an average age of forty-four years. The ethnicity of the sample is shown in Figure 4.

Migrants represent a higher proportion than would be expected since, among twenty to sixty-year-olds in the population of the two states, 28 per cent were born overseas. In Victoria, 48 per cent of offenders were migrants (30 per cent of population at large) while 37 per cent of the perpetrators in New South Wales had been born overseas (27 per cent of population at large).

Unfortunately, coronial and court records do not consistently record ethnicity nor the date of the individuals' arrival in Australia. For those cases where the latter was recorded, most of the offenders had arrived in this country as adults. Of the forty-six migrant perpetrators, seven came from Italy, six from Poland, four from Yugoslavia, three each from Malta, Hungary, Greece, and England. Other countries were represented by one or two offenders; however, none of the sample was born in an Asian or Southeast Asian country. The ethnicity of the victims in these cases is depicted in Figure 5. Most came from the same countries as the perpetrator: however, three of the victims were Filipino women who were killed by non-Filipino males.

Figure 4

**Ethnicity of Adult Sexual Intimate Homicide Offenders  
New South Wales and Victoria, 1988–90**

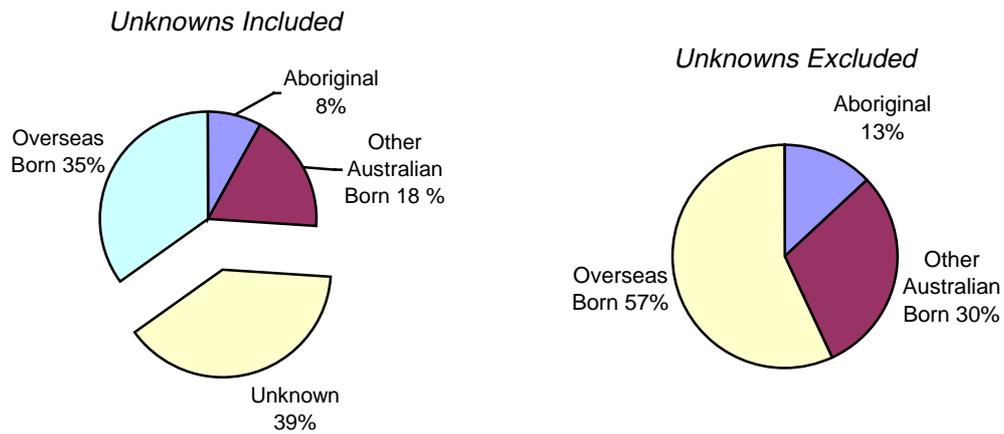


Note: In thirty-eight incidents (34 per cent of the total), ethnicity was unknown.

Source: Coronial and court files.

Figure 5

**Ethnicity of Adult Sexual Intimate Homicide Victims  
New South Wales and Victoria, 1988–90**



Note: In forty-four cases (39 per cent of the total), the ethnicity of victims was unknown.

Source: Coronial and court records.

## Occupation

As expected from previous studies (Wallace 1986; Bonney 1987), a significant proportion of the offenders (41 per cent) were unemployed at the time of the killing. However, as Figure 6 shows, there was a high proportion of 'unknowns' for this variable. Migrants were more likely to be employed (60 per cent) in comparison with Aboriginal people (33 per cent).

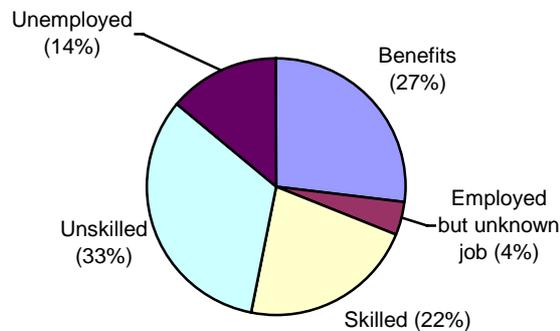
## Relationship between Offenders and Victims

More than half of the offenders (61 per cent) were still in a relationship with their victim. There were gender and ethnic variations however; male perpetrators and migrants were more likely to be estranged from their victims than were the other offenders. As Figure 7 illustrates, the bulk of offenders were husbands ( $n = 28$ ) or estranged husbands ( $n = 23$ ).

Figure 8 illustrates that for those who were no longer in an intact relationship, the time between estrangement and killing was quite variable.

*Figure 6*

### Occupation of Adult Sexual Intimate Homicide Offenders New South Wales and Victoria, 1988–90

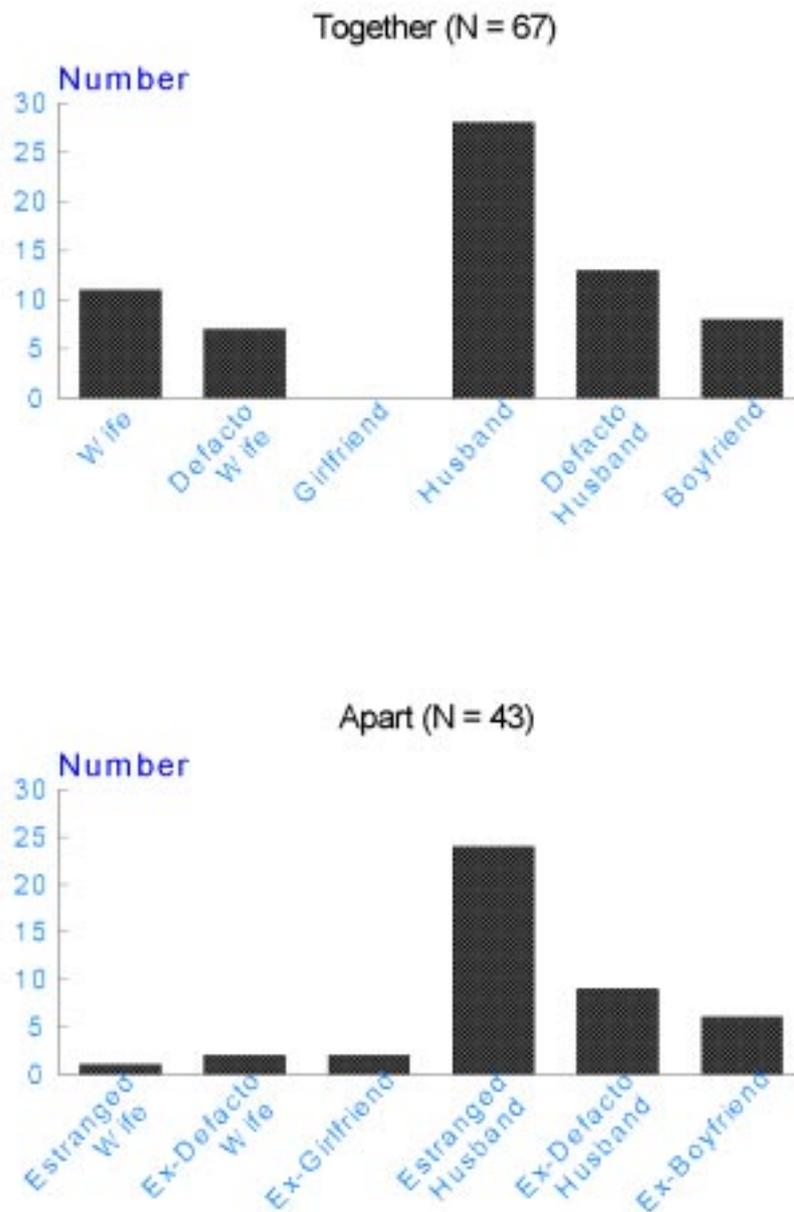


Note: In thirty-seven cases (34 per cent of total), the employment status of the offender was not known.

Source: Coronial and court records.

Figure 7

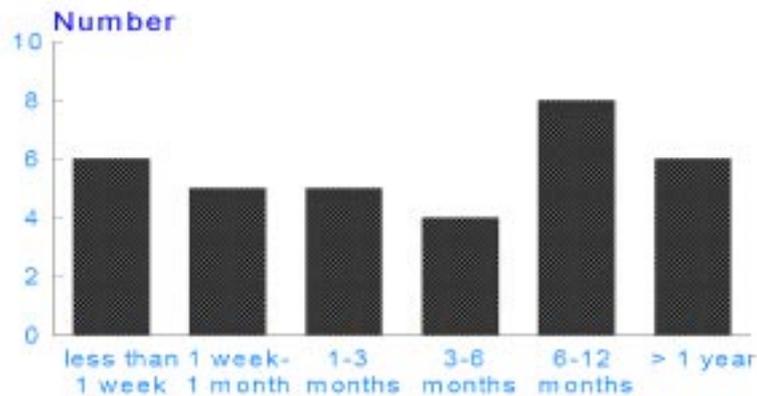
**Relationship of Offender to Victim in Homicides  
Between Adult Sexual Intimates  
New South Wales and Victoria, 1988–90**



Source: Coronial and court records.

Figure 8

**Length of Separation Prior to Homicide Between Adult Sexual Intimates  
New South Wales and Victoria, 1988–90**



Source: Coronial and court records.

**Contributory Variables**

Were these homicides preceded by histories of domestic violence in the relationship? The information conveyed in Figure 9 affirms that perspective. However, it should be read with some caution since there was a significant proportion of unknowns.

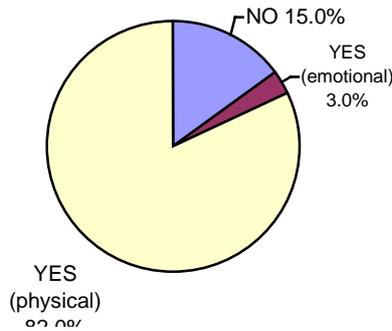
Where the offender was female and information was available, in every case but one, the homicide had been preceded by a history of battering toward the perpetrator, whilst in three-quarters of the cases perpetrated by males, the victim had previously been physically assaulted.

Alcohol abuse and, to a lesser degree, drugs, also may play a role in the relationship dynamics and the homicide. Figure 10 shows that more than half of the perpetrators were chronic alcohol users and had imbibed immediately before the killing.

Both alcohol and prior domestic violence do appear as major factors in Figure 11, which illustrates the major motives that were found in this sample of homicides. Motive varied somewhat dependant upon gender and ethnicity. For over two-thirds of the female offenders (69 per cent), prior domestic violence was a contributory factor while for almost one-half of the males (47 per cent), separation was a motive. Alcohol was most common in cases involving Aboriginal people (77 per cent).

Figure 9

**Prior Battering in Relationship (where known)  
Between Adult Sexual Intimate Homicide Offender and Victim  
New South Wales and Victoria, 1988–90**



Note: In thirty-seven cases (34 per cent of the total), the presence or absence of battering was unknown.

Source: Coronial and court records.

Figure 10

**Drug and Alcohol Histories of Adult Sexual Intimate Homicide Victims and Offenders, New South Wales and Victoria, 1988–90**

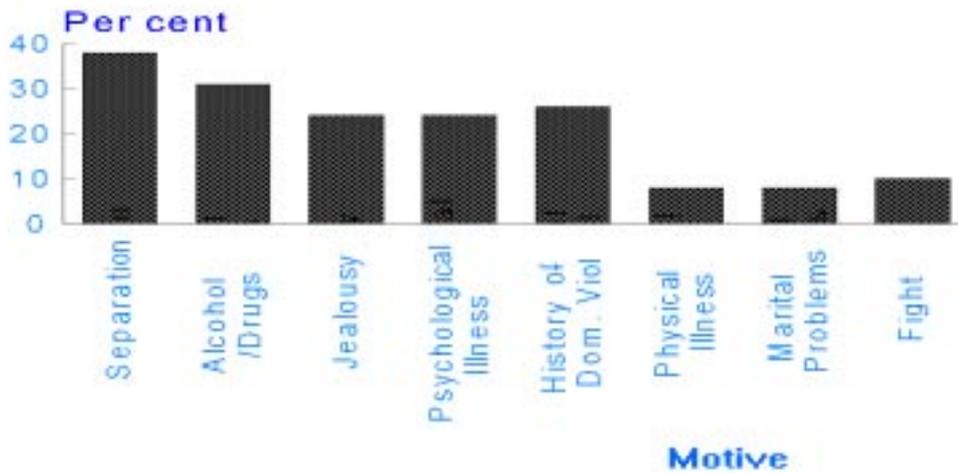


Notes: VCD: 27 per cent    VRD: 11 per cent    VCA: 34 per cent    VRA: 24 per cent  
 OCD: 37 per cent    ORD: 29 per cent    OCA: 34 per cent    ORA: 24 per cent

Source: Coronial and court records.

Figure 11

**Motive(s) for the Homicides Between Adult Sexual Intimates  
New South Wales and Victoria, 1988–90**



Note: In four incidents the motive was unknown. Vagueness of some categories (Marital Status, for example) is a reflection of the police 'cause' given in that case and the lack of more qualitative material.

Source: Coronial and court records.

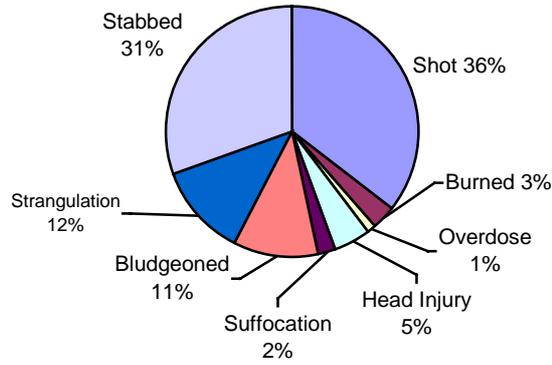
**The Homicides**

Gun shots were the most common cause of death in homicides between sexual intimates, followed closely by stab wounds (*see* Figure 12). The latter were frequently multiple in nature with over fifty cuts or lacerations inflicted. Stabbing was the most common method used by women and migrants whilst guns were the principal weapon of non-migrant males.

More than half of the killings (53 per cent) occurred within the communal home of the perpetrator and victim; while 22 per cent occurred in the victims' home and 6 per cent at the offenders'. Figure 13 shows the time of the incidents; they more commonly took place during the evening and late night hours although no hour was inviolate.

Figure 12

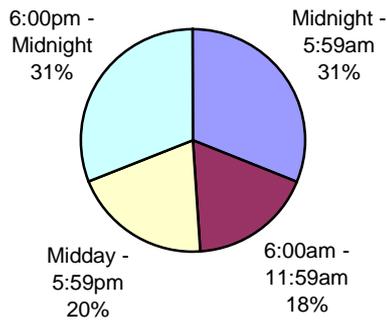
**Cause of Death in Adult Sexual Intimate Homicides  
New South Wales and Victoria, 1988–90**



Note: In three cases (3 per cent of the total), the cause of death was unknown.  
Source: Coronial and court records.

Figure 13

**Time of the Adult Sexual Intimate Homicides  
New South Wales and Victoria, 1988–90**



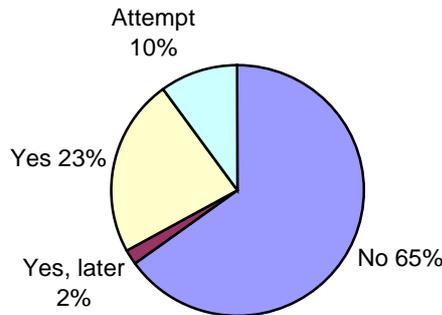
Note: In sixteen incidents (15 per cent of the total), the time was unknown.  
Source: Coronial and court records.

### Case Outcome

The National Homicide Monitoring Program data for 1989–91 indicate that one-fifth of the perpetrators in sexual intimate homicides committed suicide. Some state variation appears in these findings with Victoria having a higher proportion of sexual intimate offenders suiciding (32 per cent). Figure 14, drawn from the coronial and court data set, also includes attempted suicides. Those who killed themselves (or tried to) after the offence tended to be older and male. Only one suicider was female. An older mean age results from the seven in the sample who were aged over sixty-five and had killed a physically ill and aged partner.

*Figure 14*

#### **Suicide of Offenders in Sexual Intimate Homicides New South Wales and Victoria, 1988–90**



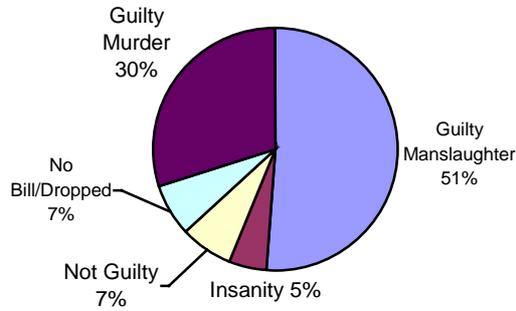
Source: Coronial and court records.

Perpetrators who went to court waited an average of sixteen months from the offence to the trial. Their court dispositions are depicted in Figures 15 and 16. Males were more likely to be found guilty of murder than females (24 per cent compared to 4 per cent), whilst the opposite was true for no bills (3 per cent of males and 15 per cent of females).

The actual sentences were quite diverse, ranging from community-based orders to life. It is not clear at this stage of analysis what variables are impacting on sentence.

Figure 15

**Disposition in Seventy-three Sexual Adult Intimate Homicides  
New South Wales and Victoria, 1988–90**



Note: Pending—3 N/A—27 Unknown—7  
Source: Coronial and court records.

Figure 16

**Bottom Sentences for Adult Sexual Intimate  
Homicide Offenders Found Guilty  
New South Wales and Victoria, 1988–90**



Source: Court and coronial records.

## Conclusion

A number of thought provoking findings have emerged in this preliminary analysis of homicide between adult sexual intimates. These include:

- the relatively high proportion of migrant males and Aboriginal women in the offender sample;
- the high incidence of prior battering and alcohol abuse histories;
- the role of separation and the time between estrangement and homicide;
- the frequency of perpetrator suicide; and
- the diversity of disposition and sentences.

Each of these results merit further inquiry and analysis, which, as stated earlier, will be done in a subsequent publication.

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