

KILLED BY A STRANGER IN VICTORIA, JANUARY 1990– APRIL 1992: LOCATION, VICTIMS' AGE AND RISK

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DURING THE LAST FEW YEARS VIOLENCE IN AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY HAS BECOME a social issue of great concern. Homicide, however, is the least frequent violent offence and accounts for only a small percentage (0.2 per cent) of deaths in any year (Law Reform Commission of Victoria 1991b, p. 3). Seven times more people commit suicide and nine times more die in traffic accidents (Mukherjee & Dagger 1990). With the exception of the Northern Territory, the homicide rate for the rest of Australia is relatively low compared to the USA, for example.

Of course, while homicide statistics tell us many things about the state of our society, they leave out the human suffering of those directly affected by the death of a loved one and statistics cannot convey the shock and despair of many a citizen at the high level of serious violence in our society. Irrespective of whether we are concerned with 'domestic' or 'stranger' homicide, the statistics do not paint the picture of brutal callousness within our community.

Whilst little systematic change in homicide rates is noticeable in most Australian jurisdictions during the period 1973–1989 (Mukherjee & Dagger

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1990, p. 8), the rate per 100,000 of the population for the following crimes during the same period has increased as follows: burglary (244 per cent); robbery (221 per cent); serious assault (481 per cent) and drugs (389 per cent). It is well-established in criminological research that the offender is a stranger to the victim in the majority of burglaries, robberies and serious assaults.

It was not until the late-1970s that researchers in Australia (for example, Burgoyne 1979) began to look closely at homicide. Since then there has been a proliferation of homicide studies and reports (*see* South Australia, Office of Crime Statistics 1981; Wallace 1986; Bonney 1987; Law Reform Commission of Victoria 1985, 1988, 1991; Kapardis & Cole 1988; Kapardis 1990; National Committee on Violence 1990; Strang 1991). While such studies provide a useful window into the social relations of violence, they have focused almost exclusively on 'domestic' homicide. One of the generally accepted findings of the homicide literature is that men figure disproportionately both as offenders and victims overall, with masculine 'proprietary' a central theme (*see* Daly & Wilson 1988; Polk & Ranson 1991). It is worth also noting, however, from the available evidence (for example, Wallace 1986; Law Reform Commission of Victoria 1991) that the risk of homicide varies across subgroups of the population.

A small number of serial killings receiving national publicity in Australia in recent years have been instrumental in generating interest into stranger homicide. Homicides in general, and stranger killings in particular, in our community are, fortunately, rather rare. Nevertheless, 'stranger violence represents one of the most frightening forms of crime victimisation' (Riedel 1987, p. 227). Furthermore:

stranger violence is a problem which, relative to the numbers involved, is disproportionate in its effect . . . stranger crime generates fear through its violent and unpredictable attacks. The fear also has the more generalised effect of degrading the quality of urban life (Riedel 1987, p. 257).

As the Australian crime figures cited above show, there seems some justification for the fear of violent victimisation by strangers. Despite the extent and seriousness of stranger violence, this type of violence has been neglected by Australian criminologists.

Stranger Killings: Incidence

Stranger killings need to be viewed in the context of stranger violence in general. According to the *Victoria Police Statistical Review of Crime*, in 1989-90, 813 robberies with a weapon, 3,920 serious assaults and 50,385 residential burglaries were reported to them. While it is armed robberies of financial institutions that attract media attention, it should not be forgotten that—according to Victoria Police figures for 1989-90—one-third of robberies are not against commercial or financial institutions. Furthermore, it is in such robberies that victims are more likely to sustain injuries (*see* Kapardis 1989b). Similarly, the majority of serious assaults involve strangers (Ministry of Police and Emergency Services, Victoria Police 1989; Robb 1988).

As far as homicide is concerned, estimates of the incidence of offenders who are strangers to their victims have ranged from 22 per cent among convicted killers in Victoria (Burgoyne 1979), 18 per cent in urban but 11 per cent in rural homicides in New South Wales (Wallace 1986), 21 per cent among homicide incidents reported to the Victoria Police Homicide Squad (Kapardis & Cole 1988), 32 per cent of male killings (excluding culpable driving) prosecuted in Victoria (Law Reform Commission of Victoria 1991a) and 30 per cent utilising national homicide data (Strang 1991). However, none of the studies mentioned have defined the term 'stranger'.

In estimating the incidence of stranger homicide in our society we need to remember that studies in the USA strongly suggest that estimates based on official data under-estimate the volume of such killings for the following reasons:

- It can be assumed that homicides do take place every year which are not listed by the police as homicides. For example, incidents in which the circumstances and cause of death (such as a drug overdose) are not apparent to those making the decision as to classification of the death.
- A number of skeletons are found every year that cannot be identified.
- A number of persons who go missing are not reported to the police and their bodies are never found (*see* Swanton & Wilson 1989). Young persons who are killed but have not been reported as missing may well include throwaway children and children abducted after they ran away from home. Hotaling and Fingelhor (1990) suggest that the prime target of stranger abduction murders in the USA are teenagers, especially those aged between fourteen and seventeen.
- A proportion of persons reported to the police as missing are never found. On the basis of statistical information provided to the author by the Victoria Police Missing Persons Bureau, in 1988-89 215 cases (3 per cent) of the 6,150 reported to them are outstanding; for 1989-90 thirty-four cases representing 4.8 per cent are also outstanding and for 1990-91 the corresponding figure is 463 persons (6.3 per cent). Information supplied by the Bureau also indicates that during the period 1980-June 1989, a total of 146 missing persons (an average of about fifteen a year) disappeared under suspicious circumstances, have not been seen or heard of since and are presumed dead. The number of such persons who fall victim to stranger killers is impossible to know. It should be noted in this context that in 1990-91 in Victoria there was a 10 per cent increase on the previous year in the number of persons reported as missing.

Research Into Stranger Killings

Regarding the context in which stranger killings take place, it is interesting to note that the main concern internationally has been with serial killings (*see* Holmes & Du Berger 1988; Masters 1986; Gee 1988; Fowler 1990; Jenkins 1989;

Wilson & Seamann 1990), with law enforcement personnel as victims of homicide (*see* Swanton 1985; Young 1990; Moorman et al 1990; Major 1991) or with mono-episodic mass murderers (*see* Levin & Fox 1985; Harnschmacher 1988; Kapardis 1989a). Available Australian research shows, for example, that a number of child victims of homicide are killed by a stranger—nine out of twenty-five in the Law Reform Commission of Victoria (1991) study—and about one in seven or eight stranger killings is committed in the context of another crime (Law Reform Commission of Victoria 1991; Strang 1991). Research also shows that assault is the most common cause of death in stranger killings irrespective of whether victims meet their death at home or in a public place.

Kapardis (1990) examined ninety stranger homicides reported to the Victoria Police Homicide Squad during the period 1984-89. It was found that:

- stranger killings include a significant proportion (21 per cent) that remain undetected;
- aggregate homicide data are misleading with reference to patterns of stranger killings;
- assault is the most common cause of death;
- stranger killings are, in the main, one-victim-only cases;
- stranger killings usually occur in the street, at work, on or close to licensed premises or in association with other crime such as robbery;
- stranger killings are significantly less likely to involve a prior dispute between the suspect and the victim;
- suspects are predominantly young men with criminal records; while
- a significant number of their victims are 45-years-old or more.

The study showed that stranger killings are heterogeneous and can be differentiated by such variables as the sex and age of the suspect and the victim, the location and method of the crime and, also, the number of assailants. On the basis of the findings obtained, ten categories of stranger homicide were identified, including battery/manslaughter in a public place, predatory/opportunist, fleeting chance encounters in public places, cases when the predator becomes the victim, contract killings and multiple murder cases. To the list can be added police shootings and police members as victims of stranger homicide. In addition to identifying categories of stranger homicide, Kapardis (1990) proposed a positive definition of 'stranger' incorporating the heterogeneity of such killings. Earlier studies of homicide and victimisation surveys have defined a 'stranger' relationship residually, that is as one in which there was no prior relationship between the offender/suspect and the victim.

Perspectives on Stranger Killings: Identifying Those at Risk

American and Canadian researchers have made use of the concept of 'relational distance' (Silvermann & Kennedy 1987) and 'daily routine activities' (Cohen & Felson 1979) in defining the homicide situation (for a discussion of these two concepts *see* Kapardis 1990). Cohen and Felson, for example, have emphasised the importance of the convergence in time and space of offenders and victims as a major determinant of crime rates. Both the 'relational distance' and the 'daily routine activities' approach have shown that aggregate homicide data can be misleading with regard to patterns.

To illustrate, using aggregate homicide data it is found that persons aged forty-five or older in Victoria comprise 10 per cent of victims. However, using stranger homicide data yields a figure of 40 per cent for the same age-group (*see* Kapardis 1990, p. 249). It has been a doctrine in criminology that the elderly experience low rates of victimisation and high levels of fear of violent crime (Solicitor General of Canada 1985; National Committee on Violence 1990, p. 35). The explanation offered for the apparently low victimisation rate of the elderly is in terms of their lifestyles and self-protective tendencies (Felson & Cohen 1980). However, findings reported by Canadian (Silvermann & Kennedy 1987; Kennedy & Silvermann 1990) and American (Copeland 1986; Maxfield 1989) researchers contradict the predicted elderly victimisation pattern, reporting that the elderly are victims of felony-motivated homicide greater than expected on the basis of their representation in the general population. Kennedy and Silvermann (1990) examined all homicides ($n = 9,642$) committed in Canada between 1961 and 1983. Considering only one offender and one victim from each incident, they found that 44.7 per cent of the victims aged sixty-five or older were killed by a stranger.

The elderly are victims of homicide most often as a result of blunt force in their own homes. Although the location is as expected, beating rather than shooting or stabbing is the most prevalent means of homicide commission against the elderly. Further, they are victims of theft-based murder more often than anticipated. Proportionately, they suffer this kind of homicide far more than any age group at the hands of a younger stranger (Kennedy & Silverman 1990, pp. 313-16).

Kennedy and Silverman concluded that the home is as dangerous as a public place with regard to theft-based homicide by strangers. Kennedy and Silverman explain their findings by pointing out that the elderly person is not the target of the crime but the dwelling and its contents. The authors' explanation of elderly homicide fits a modified version of the 'routine activities' theory. Drawing on overseas research and Kapardis (1990), the main aim of the study reported in this paper has been to test the hypothesis that the elderly are victimised more than expected in their own homes by much younger offenders in the context of another crime and are killed as a result of being assaulted.

Homicide by Location and Victims' Age

The data for the present study are derived exclusively from Victoria Police Homicide Squad records for the period January 1990 to April 1992, supplemented as necessary by information provided by detectives involved in individual homicide investigations. One limitation of such data (*see also* Strang 1991) is the inevitable subjectivity in such information. Another limitation is the relatively small number of cases. The analysis draws on fifty-six stranger homicides (excluding police shootings and death due to culpable driving) representing 38 per cent of a total of 149 homicides during the period concerned. At the time of writing (beginning of May 1992), 43 per cent of the stranger homicides remain unsolved. The fifty-six incidents involved sixty-three victims and fifty-seven suspects.

Incident Characteristics

Twenty-one per cent of the cases involved more than one suspect but only seven (11 per cent) involved more than one victim. Seventy-one per cent took place at night (no information on time of incident was available in 20 per cent of the cases); almost half (47 per cent) of the incidents took place during Monday to Thursday. As far as location is concerned, over half (55 per cent) took place in the victim's dwelling and 25 per cent on or in the vicinity of licensed premises. Assault was the cause of death in half of the incidents, stabbing in 29 per cent and firearms in 17 per cent (information on cause of death was available on 93 per cent of the cases). The homicide was committed in the context of another crime, especially burglary, in 46 per cent of the cases. Such homicides tended to be drug-related.

Victim and Suspect Characteristics

Sixty-five per cent of the victims were males, 41 per cent were aged thirty or less, and 25 per cent were aged sixty or older. Representation of the elderly was higher than would have been expected. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (1991), 15.6 per cent of Victoria's population is aged 60 or older. Fourteen per cent of the victims had been reported as 'missing persons'. In support of overseas trends, victims aged 60 or more comprised more than half (55 per cent) of those killed in their home. Of the sixteen elderly, fifteen were killed in the context of another crime, fourteen were killed at home and eleven in the evening.

As expected, 88 per cent of the suspects were males, 61 per cent had a criminal record, 75 per cent were aged thirty or younger and, finally, more than one suspect were involved in 21 per cent of the homicide events.

Discussion

The findings reported supplement those reported by Kapardis (1990) and suggest that more stranger killings remain undetected than was the case in the past and, also, that such killings could well be increasing in Victoria. It must not be forgotten that a number of the 43 per cent of those cases that

remain unsolved may have been perpetrated by a stranger. Drawing on Kapardis (1990) and the present study, it can be stated that stranger homicides take place in five broad contexts:

- gangland killings;
- arising out of altercations on or close to licensed premises;
- in the context of another crime at the victim's place of residence or in a public location;
- single victim sexual/thrill/abduction killings; and
- serial/mass murder.

The present study provides a disturbing picture of the interaction between alcohol, violence and masculinity in killings arising out of altercations on or in the vicinity of licensed premises. In such cases, males—often at the edge of society, aggressively masculine and incessantly fearful of 'put downs'—tragically try to maintain their machismo in what Savitz, Kumar & Zahn (1991) has termed 'contests of character'. The issue of proving one's masculinity through conflict and violence needs to be addressed more meaningfully and effectively in schools, in families and in the media. To acknowledge that Australians have a corrosive pro-violence trait—a malignant cancer that eats away at our basic right to live our lives in safety at home and in public—is an important step towards halting our obsession with violence in our society.

There is no doubt that drug-addiction is a major contributory factor in the burglary rate, in gangland killings and those committed in the context of another crime. It is high time Australians bit the bullet and adopted policies that will tackle the 'drug problem' effectively (for example, decriminalising illicit drug-abuse under strict legal controls combined with comprehensive treatment programs)—law-enforcement is not the answer in the long run. Meanwhile, as this country's criminal justice system continues to be a failure, as the incidence of illegal drug-use, serious assaults and burglaries continues to increase and, finally, as the proportion of elderly in our society also continues to increase (*see* Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs 1985), it is to be expected that fatal attacks against elderly people in their own homes by young offenders with criminal records will also increase as they have done in the USA (*see* Cheatwood & Block 1990), in Denmark (*see* Gottlieb & Gorm 1988) and in Sweden (*see* Lindquist 1991), for example.

On the basis of the 'daily routine activities' theory we can say that an elderly person living at home by themselves or with their spouse, is not detected by the burglar trespassing in their dwelling at night. In a confrontation, the elderly may or may not resist but are beaten. While a younger person might recover, the vulnerable elderly victim dies (*see* Grabosky 1989, pp. 18-19). In other words, the safety of the home is offset by the vulnerability to attack during a crime and the difficulty in recovery from a physical and psychological assault. In his discussion of rape and burglary, Warr (1988) suggests that one type of rape results from a

chance encounter between a burglar and the victim in the victim's home. This scenario is very similar to that suggested for elderly victims of stranger homicide. Fortunately, the incidence of such tragic encounters (sixteen in twenty-eight months) is very small indeed and should not be used by the media to fan old people's fear of violent victimisation. However, there is a need for a systematic campaign to help elderly people address their safety fears and develop strategies that would enhance their personal safety. Community seminar programs for this purpose are already in existence in parts of Melbourne (*see* 'Working to Help Aged Feel Safe', *Northcote Leader*, 6 May 1992, p. 4).

There are many overlapping and competing theoretical explanations for elder mistreatment in domestic violence (for example, situational, social exchange theory, symbolic interactionism, social learning theory, psychology of the abuser and privacy of the family (*see* Tomita 1990)).

Applying the routine activities approach in an attempt to model the distribution of homicide rates and to place the incidence of elderly victimisation identified in the present study, it would be useful to incorporate three exogenous constructs—'social disintegration', 'resource deprivation' and 'violent cultural orientation' (*see* Williams & Flewelling 1988). In doing so, however, one needs to note that 'social conditions assumed to shape the control of homicide vary in their effects by type of homicide' (Gartner 1990). Without precluding a general model of stranger homicide victimisation, special attention needs to be paid to the heterogeneity of acts comprising the total homicide rate in general and stranger homicide in particular (*see* Fiala & La Free 1988).

The fact that assault is the most common cause of death in the stranger killings points to the need to rethink our concept of a 'weapon'. Two young, fit males can easily kill an elderly person who disturbs them as they are ransacking his/her dwelling—even one such offender requires no weapon to inflict fatal injuries because his kicks and punches are as effective.

Finally, the rather high percentage of stranger killings that remains unsolved should be a cause for concern and every effort should be made to reduce it. According to McDowell (1978, p. 110), the ancient Athenians believed that 'miasma'—a kind of moral pollution, a supernatural infection—would afflict a community in which a killer was not brought to justice. That ancient belief is reflected, for example, in Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus Tyrannos*, at the beginning of which a plague afflicts the citizens because a killer is living among them unpunished. Our contemporary Australian society—also evidencing signs of 'miasma' while figuring out what to do about serious violence—is in dire need of 'purification' by apprehending and punishing those who kill.

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