

CHARACTERISTICS OF HOMICIDE IN AUSTRALIA 1990- 91

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER IS TO DESCRIBE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF homicide incidents, victims and offenders in Australia at the present time, so as to provide a framework for the more detailed discussion of various aspects of homicide which will follow in the course of this conference.

The source of these data is police records, collected via the National Homicide Monitoring Program at the Australian Institute of Criminology. This Program was established as a result of recommendations of the National Committee on Violence, which noted the paucity of information available in Australia on the incidence and epidemiology of violence generally, and homicide in particular. It has been made possible through the support of the Australian Police Ministers' Council and the cooperation of police in each jurisdiction.

The aim of the Program is to collect information annually on all homicide incidents and the victims and offenders involved in them. Such information has been collected before, though only in single jurisdictions rather than nationally, and only over limited periods rather than on an ongoing basis.

The National Homicide Monitoring Program has now collected and analysed data on all homicides which occurred in Australia between July 1989 and June 1991. It is too soon to begin to discern trends and patterns in homicide, although after a third year's data has been examined more detailed analysis of this kind will be possible: such knowledge as begins to emerge at that time will be useful 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 and in the allocation of scarce public resources.

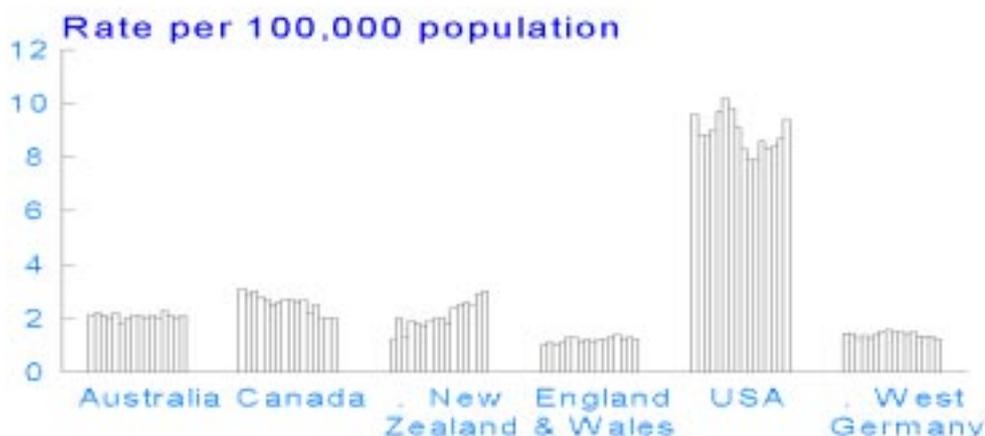
Australian Homicide in Context

Before turning to a description of the character of Australian homicide, as it is revealed in these data, the present situation will be placed in both an international and an historical context.

Figure 1 shows Australia's overall homicide rate compared with five similar countries—Canada, New Zealand, England and Wales, West Germany and the USA—over the period 1974 to 1989. As one would expect, Australia's rate is similar to all these countries, except for the USA, whose rate dwarfs all the others. Australia's rate is currently about 2.1 per 100,000 population, which is slightly lower than Canada and slightly above England and Wales.

Figure 1

Reported Homicide Rate per 100,000 Population, 1975 to 1990



Source: Mukherjee, S.K. & Dagger, D. 1990, *The Size of the Crime Problem in Australia*, 2nd edn, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.

There have been significant changes in homicide rates in the course of Australian history. Available evidence indicates that the rate last century was much higher than today. However rates declined in the latter half of the 1800s and early twentieth century. Figure 2 indicates Australia's homicide rate since 1915: it shows that rates continued to decline until the second World War. Rates then increased at the end of the war, and gradually continued to do so, fluctuating around an upward trend. Figure 3 shows male and female rates separately: they tend to coincide, though female rates are consistently lower than male rates.

Figure 2

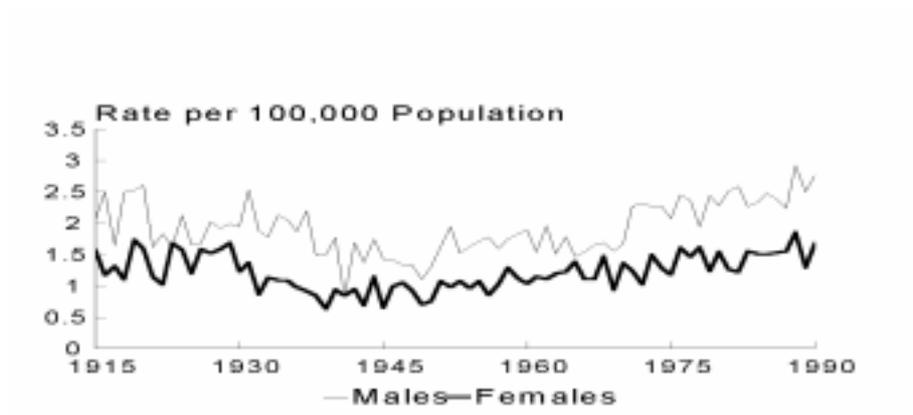
Number of Homicides per 100,000 Population, Australia 1915-1990



Source: Mukherjee, S.K., Scandia, A., Dagger, D. & Matthews, W. 1989, *Source Book of Australian Criminal and Social Statistics 1804-1988*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.

Figure 3

Number of Male and Female Homicides per 100,000 Population Australia 1915-1990

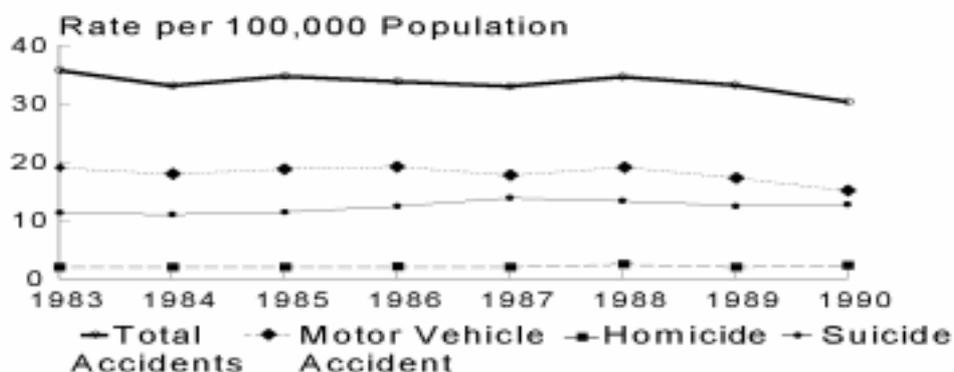


Source: Mukherjee, S.K., Scandia, A., Dagger, D. & Matthews, W. 1989, *Source Book of Australian Criminal and Social Statistics 1804-1988*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.

Although homicide is the most serious offence under the law, and the crime which engenders the most fear, it is important to understand that it remains a relatively rare occurrence in Australia overall: Figure 4 shows the rate per 100,000 for various causes of death between 1983 and 1989. Compared with accidents—both motor vehicle and other—and with suicide, homicide remains both relatively low and stable.

Figure 4

Death Statistics, Australia 1983-1990



Source: Mukherjee, S.K., Scandia, A., Dagger, D. & Matthews, W. 1989, *Source Book of Australian Criminal and Social Statistics 1804-1988*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.

Salient Features of Australian Homicide

In the year 1990-91, there were a total of 323 homicide incidents in Australia, involving 351 victims and 338 identified offenders (this term is used to include both suspects and those charged and convicted of an offence). There were forty-five incidents where no suspect/offender had been identified at the time the data were collected.

The salient feature of Australian homicide is its male character and the relative youth of many of those involved, both as victims and offenders. Over the past two years male victims have outnumbered females by around two to one. For offenders, the proportion of male and female offenders has approached 10:1.

Over the past two years, around 40 per cent of victims were aged under thirty, and a further 20 per cent aged between thirty and thirty-nine. Nearly 60 per cent of offenders were aged under thirty and a further 20 per cent aged between thirty and thirty-nine.

Another salient factor is that of Aboriginality. (In these data, the term 'Aboriginal person' includes Torres Strait Islanders). Aboriginal homicide requires special comment not because it differs markedly in character from homicide in Australia generally, but because of the sheer volume. Over the past two years Aboriginal persons have made up around 13 per cent of all victims of homicide and nearly 20 per cent of offenders. In the great majority of these incidents, both victim and offender were Aboriginal persons, and in almost all cases victim and offender were members of the same family or very well-known to each other.

The last significant feature to be mentioned here is the very high rate of homicide occurring in the Northern Territory compared with other jurisdictions. It is clear that a consideration of the demographic character of that jurisdiction, which includes a high proportion of Aboriginal people and a high proportion of unattached, transient young men, is vital in explaining this situation.

This paper will now turn to a more detailed analysis of the nature of homicide incidents which occurred in 1990-91 and features of those involved in them.

Characteristics of Homicide Incidents in 1990-91

The character of each homicide incident depends upon the contextual features of each: these include the jurisdiction in which it occurs, its geographical and physical location, 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

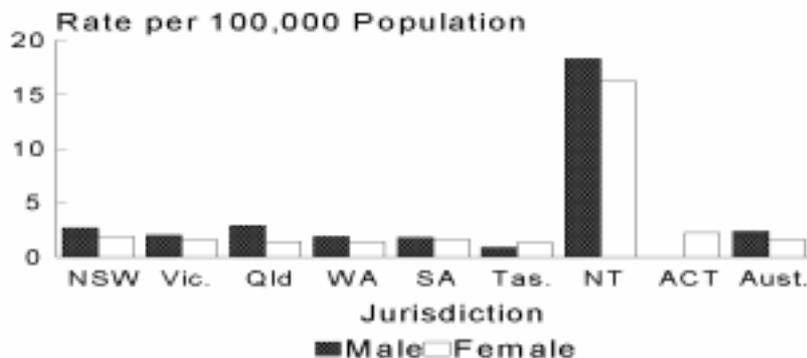
As Figure 5 shows, the rate of homicide victimisation is fairly uniform across Australia, with the exception of the Northern Territory: here the rate is more than eight times that for Australia as a whole, while the rate for women is almost twenty times that for Australian women generally. Figure 6 shows a similar distribution for offending, with the exception of the much lower rate of offending for women generally, especially in the Northern Territory.

In 1990-91, in every jurisdiction except the Australian Capital Territory, around 90 per cent of incidents involved one victim only and one offender only (nineteen incidents involved multiple victims and thirty-nine incidents multiple offenders, from the total of 323 incidents).

The overall rate of victimisation remained stable over the past two years, and in some jurisdictions the rate declined slightly in 1990-91. Nearly all the increase occurred in two jurisdictions: in New South Wales the rate per 100,000 of the population increased from 1.8 to 2.3, and in the Northern Territory it increased from 12.8 to 17.3.

Figure 5

Jurisdiction and Sex of Victims, Australia 1990-91



Geographical area

As would be expected, more than half of incidents occurred in the major metropolitan areas around Australia: in most instances the proportion occurring in each capital city closely reflected the proportion of the population living in those centres. Regional centres and country towns accounted for a further quarter of all incidents.

Location

About 60 per cent of all incidents occurred within residential premises. The vast majority of these were the victim’s own home, which not infrequently was also the offender’s home, as one-quarter of victims were cohabiting with the offender at the time of the incident. A higher proportion of women than men (57 per cent versus 38 per cent) were killed in their own homes. A further 15 per cent of incidents occurred in streets or car parks, mostly in suburban locations.

Shops, shopping malls, sporting venues, public transport and its environs, taxis and other vehicles, public parks and beaches together accounted for fewer than ten per cent of all incidents.

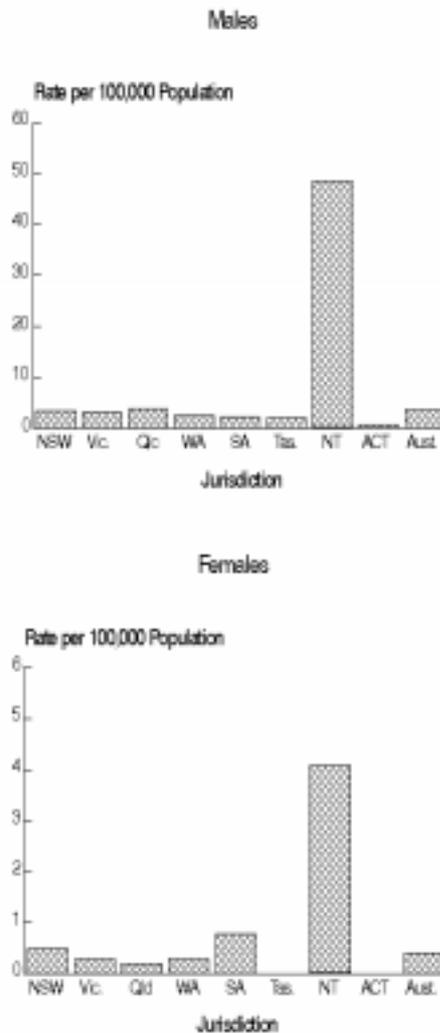
Time of day/Day of week

Half of all incidents occurred on Friday, Saturday or Sunday, most of Sunday’s occurring in the early hours of the morning. The pattern was similar across all jurisdictions.

Of those incidents for which the time of occurrence was known, 40 per cent occurred between six in the evening and midnight, and a further 30 per cent occurred between midnight and six in the morning.

Figure 6

**Jurisdiction and Sex of Offenders*
Australia 1990-91**



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

Note: These figures are not comparable as different rates per 100,000 population are used.

Precipitating factors

Figure 7 shows the primary precipitating factors in homicide in 1990-91. Australia-wide, altercations relating to jealousy or the termination of a sexual relationship accounted for 16 per cent of incidents. Domestic altercations between spouses or other family members accounted for at least 13 per cent of all incidents. Thus almost one-third of incidents relate to the breakdown of

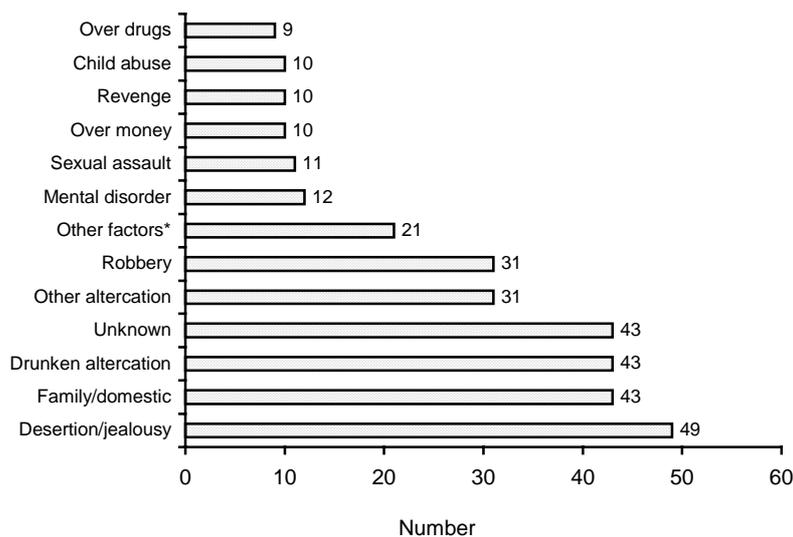
family relationships. A further 13 per cent involved drunken altercations over apparently trivial issues, usually between male peers.

In all jurisdictions these factors were the most common in the precipitation of the incident. In the Northern Territory, two-thirds of all incidents related to one or other of these factors: this reflects their predominance in homicides involving Aboriginal persons throughout Australia.

Homicides resulting from another criminal offence remain relatively uncommon, although there has been an increase in robberies with a fatal outcome: 10 per cent of all homicides involved a robbery, and more than half of these occurred in New South Wales. Three per cent of incidents involved a sexual assault and two-thirds of these occurred in New South Wales.

Figure 7

Primary Precipitating Factors, Australia 1990-91



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

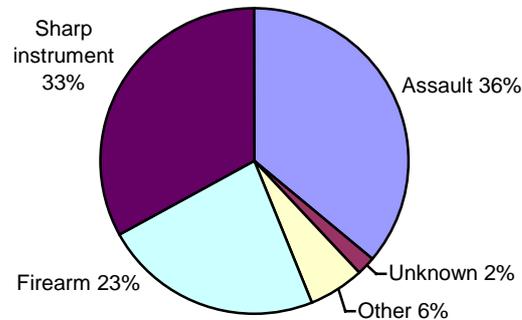
In forty-three incidents the primary precipitating factor was unknown.

Weapon/method

Figure 8 shows that in 1990-91 assault was the most common method of homicide (this category includes strangulation and the use of a blunt instrument, as well as beatings). Knives and other sharp instruments accounted for a further 33 per cent of all incidents, and firearms 23 per cent. Overall, this was very close to the situation in 1989-90. About half of all firearms-related homicides occurred in New South Wales.

Figure 8

Primary Weapon/Method, Australia 1990-91



Where firearms were involved, nearly half of all victims were killed with .22 calibre rifles and a further one-quarter with shotguns. Handgun killings remain relatively rare (ten victims).

Choice of weapon varies with circumstance: firearms were not commonly used in drunken or other kinds of altercations, where beatings and knives were the most common cause of death. Over half of all robbery-related homicides resulted from an assault.

As far as sex of the victim is concerned, a higher proportion of women than men were the victims of fatal assaults, and a significant proportion of these were strangulations. A slightly higher proportion of men than women were the victims of firearms.

Male and female offenders differed as to their choice of weapon: 11 per cent of women used a gun, compared with 22 per cent of men; over half of all women offenders used knives or other sharp instruments.

Firearms are very rarely used in homicides involving Aboriginal persons: there is a correspondingly higher incidence of assault as the cause of death.

Illicit drug involvement

In only 5 per cent of all incidents were illicit drugs definitely involved. These incidents usually related either to disputes over dealing, getting money for drugs or acquiring drugs for personal use. Most of these incidents occurred in New South Wales and Victoria. It is possible that a proportion of the robbery-related homicides also were drug-related—indeed that illicit drugs were involved in a number of other incidents too—but no firm information was available on this.

Characteristics of Homicide Victims 1990-91

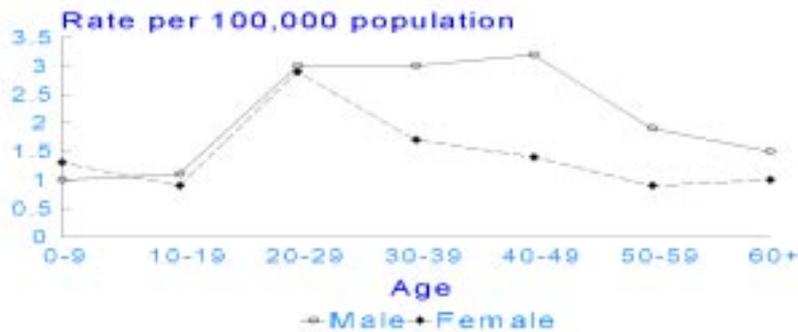
There were 351 victims of homicide throughout Australia in 1990-91.

Sex and age

Nearly two-thirds of victims were male and about one-quarter of all victims were aged in their twenties. About a half of all female victims were aged under thirty, whereas the ages of male victims was spread over a wider range. Figure 9 shows the rate for different age groups.

Figure 9

Age of Victims, Australia 1990-91



It is important to note the special vulnerability of infants. Children aged under one year were at the greatest risk of any age group in 1990-91, with a rate of 3.5 per cent per 100,000 age specific population (up from 2.8 in 1989-90). Females in this age group appeared to be especially at risk, with a rate per 100,000 of 4.8. Altogether, there were twenty-nine victims aged under ten years: three-quarters of these children were killed by their parents or de facto parents.

As far as jurisdictional differences are concerned, young people appeared to be at higher risk in New South Wales in 1990-91. Nearly 60 per cent of all victims under twenty died in New South Wales: one-quarter of all New South Wales victims were aged under twenty. In the Northern Territory, nearly half of all victims were aged between twenty and twenty-nine, compared with one-quarter nationally.

As far as juveniles are concerned, girls under twenty seemed to be at higher risk than boys in that age group.

Although there were nine victims under the age of one year, there were twenty victims aged between one and ten years: most of these (70 per cent) were killed by their parents or de facto parents.

Marital status

For around 60 per cent of victims, marital status was single or no longer married. Fewer than 30 per cent of males were known to be married, compared with 43 per cent of females.

Employment status

Of those victims where employment status was known, around half of males were employed and one-quarter of females. A proportion of women were out of the workforce by choice owing to domestic responsibilities: however, these figures indicate that being out of the workforce may of itself indicate enhanced risk.

Race

Aboriginal persons make up 1.5 per cent of the Australian population, but composed 13 per cent of all homicide victims in 1990-91 (11 per cent of all males and 16 per cent of all females). Whereas the overall homicide rate for 1990-91 was 2.1 per 100,000, for Aboriginal persons it was 18.7. When the figures are disaggregated by sex, the enhanced risk of Aboriginal women is evident: the risk overall for Australian males compared to females for 1990-91 approached 2:1, whilst for Aboriginal persons it was 1:1 (that is, 50 per cent of all Aboriginal victims were women).

It is useful to assess Aboriginal vulnerability by jurisdiction. In the Northern Territory, where Aboriginal persons make up 22 per cent of the population, 56 per cent of all victims were Aboriginal persons. Proportionately the figures for Queensland and Western Australia are even more noteworthy: in Queensland Aboriginal persons make up 2.4 per cent of the population and 18 per cent of victims, and in Western Australia Aboriginal persons compose 2.7 per cent of the population and 35 per cent of victims.

There was a total of eleven cases where the offender was an Aboriginal person and the victim was white: in a further five instances, the offender was white and the victim was an Aboriginal person. None of these cases appeared to be racially motivated and Australian homicide remains overwhelmingly intra-racial.

There was little noteworthy regarding other non-white races, except to observe the low incidence and the fact that when homicide occurred, both victim and offender were almost always the same race.

Alcohol/drug use

This was known for only two-thirds of all victims. However, of these, nearly half were known to be alcohol affected (most of these were males). In the Northern Territory, this proportion rose to 70 per cent: this figure is linked to the finding that 85 per cent of Aboriginal victims were recorded as being alcohol affected.

There was some variability according to age: more of the younger than older victims were alcohol affected. There was a negligible incidence of other drug influence amongst any victims.

Criminal history

Criminal histories were available for about 80 per cent of victims. Of these, over one-third of all victims had a criminal record, about half of them for violent offences. Two-thirds of these were male. For Aboriginal persons, about half of all victims had criminal records of some kind. Very low figures were recorded for those of other races.

Characteristics of Homicide Offenders 1990-91

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

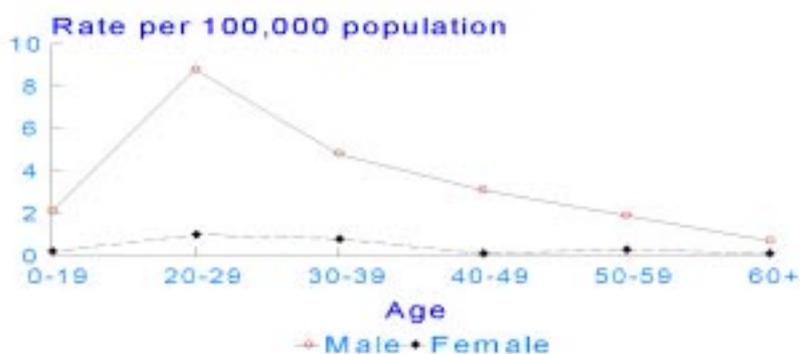
Age and sex

Figure 10 shows that homicide offenders were overwhelmingly male: males outnumbered females by a factor of ten. They were predominantly young: nearly 20 per cent were aged under nineteen and a further 40 per cent aged between twenty and thirty.

Nearly 60 per cent of all homicides involved both male victims and male offenders. For nearly one-third of all pairs the victim was female and the offender male. Only 10 per cent of pairs involved a female offender.

Figure 10

Age of Offenders, Australia 1990-91



Marital status

There were quite different patterns in marital status for men and women: over half of men were single or divorced but only 16 per cent of women; one-third of men were married or in a de facto relationship and nearly three-quarters of women.

Employment status

For those offenders where employment status was known, less than one-third were employed. For women, the proportion was less than 20 per cent.

Race

Twenty-one per cent of all offenders were Aboriginal persons: this figure was inflated by one particular incident which resulted in eleven Aboriginal offenders being charged, but without this case the figure would still be 18 per cent. This figure applies for both Aboriginal men and women.

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

There were very low rates of offending by other non-white races.

Alcohol/drug influence

Information about the influence of alcohol or drugs was available for only just over half of all identified offenders: of these, three-quarters were under the influence of alcohol. This applied across all jurisdictions and for both male and female offenders.

Proportionately more Aboriginal offenders than whites were under the influence of alcohol: no offender of any other race was known to be alcohol affected.

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

Criminal history

At least two-thirds of all offenders had a previous criminal history, and for more than half of these a violent offence had been recorded. In the case of women offenders, about one-third had previous convictions, over half of these for violent offences.

When these data are disaggregated by race, we find that at least 80 per cent of all Aboriginal offenders had criminal histories compared with 65 per cent of whites: twice as many Aboriginal offenders as whites had previous convictions for serious assault.

Murder-Suicide

A total of twenty-three offenders committed suicide following the incident, and a further four attempted suicide. These made up 8 per cent of the total of identified offenders. They were all male and none was an Aboriginal person. In two-thirds of these cases, the victim and offender were or had been in a spousal relationship: in most of the remaining instances, the victim and offender were closely related to each other.

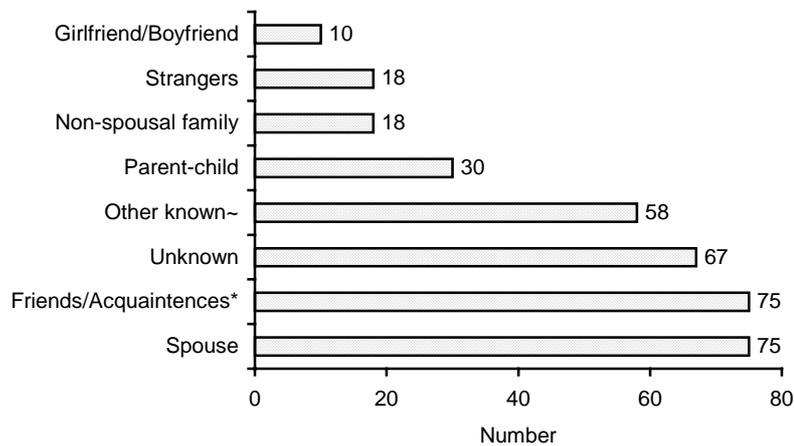
Relationship between Victim and Offender

One of the most revealing variables in homicide, from the point of view of determining the underlying dynamics of each incident, is the relationship between victims and offenders.

Figure 11 shows the proportion of different kinds of relationship in homicides occurring in 1990-91. Of those cases where the relationship was known, 26 per cent of victims were spouses of the offender (present or former, married or de facto). Of these, 85 per cent were women. Forty-two per cent of all female victims were killed by spouses, and 6 per cent of all males.

Figure 11

Relationship Between Victims and Offenders, Australia 1990-91



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

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

The next largest category was the 24 per cent of instances where the relationship is broadly described as friends and acquaintances: this also includes girlfriend-boyfriend, ex girlfriend-boyfriend, homosexual relationships, short-term (less than 24-hour) acquaintances and gang members.

A further 17 per cent of victims knew the offender in some way: this category includes business relationships, prostitute-client relationships and sex rivals. In only 5 per cent of cases was the offender known to be stranger: of course, the real figure is likely to be higher than this, as an unknown proportion of the forty-five unsolved cases would have involved stranger offenders.

As far as jurisdictional differences are concerned, the Northern Territory had a higher than expected proportion of spousal homicides (37 per cent). This is a consequence of the relatively high levels of these incidents amongst Aboriginal persons: the relationship with the victim was spousal for 17 per cent of white offenders overall and 34 per cent of Aboriginal offenders.

Conclusion

This description of the characteristics of victims and perpetrators of homicide in 1990-91, and of the circumstances in which the incidents occurred, reveals the enhanced vulnerability of those on the margin in our society—a vulnerability which can only increase in economic hard times when the poor and disadvantaged are squeezed most.

However, attention should be drawn to the special vulnerability of young children in Australia. Generally speaking, young children do not appear to be over represented as victims of homicide, considering the proportion of the total population that they constitute—although, for the past several years children in Australia under the age of one year were actually at greater risk than any other age group.

The point this paper wishes to make, however, is that 1990-91 saw the deaths of twenty-nine children under the age of ten. In none of these cases was a charge of infanticide laid, where it was available: all resulted in charges of manslaughter or murder. None of these children were going to pubs or getting into potentially lethal arguments with their peers: they were victims in the truest sense of the word, with no control over their circumstances. They were completely vulnerable. They were frequently the object of their parents' unreasoned rage towards them, or towards each other. It is suggested that a compassionate society has a special responsibility to protect those who cannot protect themselves, and twenty-nine young children died last year because we failed in that responsibility.

Of course, homicides represent only the tip of the iceberg of violence in our society: almost all homicides begin as another kind of confrontation—a spousal argument, a robbery, a drunken fight between acquaintances, the abuse of a child—that escalates to a fatal event. But whilst homicides remain relatively rare events, these kinds of nonfatal confrontations are not.

The key to homicide prevention is to focus on those situations which are the most dangerous and on the people who are at highest risk of victimisation. By finding out as much as we can about homicide incidents, the

people involved in them and the relationships between them, we can begin to devise strategies to lessen the risks associated with such individuals and such circumstances, and so discover how lives may be saved.