



No. 96

# Homicide & Older People in Australia

Carlos Carcach, Marianne James &  
P.N. Grabosky

*The "baby boom" which followed the end of the Second World War produced an age cohort whose members are now entering their middle years. At the latest population census, the people in the age group 65 years and over numbered 2 151 000 or just over 12 per cent of the total population (ABS 1997). This is projected to rise to between 16 and 18 per cent in the year 2021 and then to between 19 and 21 per cent in the year 2031 (ABS 1994).*

*According to the latest National Crime and Safety Survey conducted in 1993 (ABS 1994), persons aged 65 years and over had a violent victimisation rate barely one-fifth of the national average. In addition, offending by older people is a rare occurrence relative to people from other age groups, as shown by official statistics. Nevertheless, as Australia's population becomes relatively older, monitoring the extent to which those aged 65 years and over are involved in crime, especially violent crime, is increasingly important.*

*This paper explores homicide victimisation among older Australians. The analysis is based on data extracted from the National Homicide Monitoring Program at the Australian Institute of Criminology. This database reveals that during the period 1 July 1989 to 30 June 1996, there were 2415 victims of homicide, and that a little less than 1 in 15 of these victims were aged 65 years and over. Despite homicide being a rare occurrence among older Australians, understanding the factors associated with these incidents is important to develop preventive measures. It is instructive to observe that, as it is the case with other age groups, homicide mortality for older Australians is vastly exceeded by other causes of death.*

*As we approach the International Year of Older Persons (1999), the Australian Institute of Criminology will continue to analyse issues relating to crime and older people, and contribute where possible to reduce their risk of violent victimisation.*

Adam Graycar  
Director

In this paper, the term **homicide** refers to a person killed, and a **homicide incident** is an event in which one or more persons are killed at the same place and time. The term **older people** refers to persons aged 65 years and over. Data from the National Homicide Monitoring Program at the Australian Institute of Criminology show that 149 of the 2226 homicide incidents recorded during the seven-year period from 1 July 1989 to 30 June 1996 involved older people. These incidents resulted in 164 victims aged 65 years and over and involved 37 offenders aged 65 years and over. Of the older victims, 84 were male and 80 were female. Of the older offenders, 35 were male and 2 were female.

Despite the attention that homicide against older people tends to attract, its incidence is very low. Official statistics on causes of death show that people aged 65 years and over are 11 times more likely to die from suicide and self-inflicted injuries, 15 times more likely to die in a road traffic accident and almost 3000 times more likely to die from heart disease, cerebrovascular disease and neoplasms than from homicide (ABS 1996).

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE  
OF CRIMINOLOGY

*trends*  
&  
*issues*

in crime and criminal justice

October 1998

ISSN 0817-8542

ISBN 0 642 24081 7



Australian Institute  
of Criminology  
GPO Box 2944  
Canberra ACT 2601  
Australia

Tel: 02 6260 9200

Fax: 02 6260 9201

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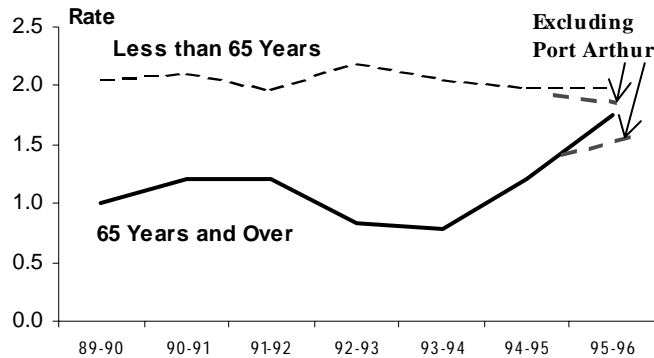
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The fact that older people are at a low risk of becoming a victim of homicide is not unique to Australia. In their study of homicide in the United States, Fox and Levin (1991) reported that older people were at the lowest risk for homicide mortality generally. Cutright and Briggs (1995) report similar findings for 21 developed countries. In Australia, the risk of becoming the victim of homicide peaks in late adolescence/early adulthood and declines thereafter. Older people are the least at risk of any age cohort apart from children aged between 5 and 14 with whom they share a similar risk (James & Carcach 1997).

This paper identifies patterns and trends in homicide involving older Australians using data held as part of the National Homicide Monitoring Program at the Australian Institute of Criminology. Data are derived exclusively from police records, supplemented as necessary with information provided directly by police involved in individual homicide investigations. The circumstances of homicide are rather complex, and a degree of subjective judgment may be exercised both by police in recording information relating to each case, and by Australian Institute of Criminology staff in coding the data. Moreover, some facts relating to the incident, the victim, and/or the perpetrator, may not be identifiable. A total of 2226 homicide incidents were recorded for the period from 1 July 1989 until 30 June 1996, involving 2415 victims and 2652 perpetrators or suspects. These totals differ because some incidents involved more than one victim and/or perpetrator. They may also differ slightly from those derived from other databases, such as the ABS database on causes of death. However, any marginal differences are unlikely to detract significantly from the comparisons and the inferences drawn here.

As the number of offenders aged 65 years and over recorded during the seven-year period under study is too small, the analyses that follow focus on

**Figure 1: AUSTRALIA, 1989-96, Homicide, victimisation rates per 100 000 population by age group**



victimisation. Emphasis is placed on incident details, victim characteristics and the victim-offender relationship.

### Trends in Homicide against Older People

Figure 1 shows the homicide rate per 100 000 population for older people and for the population aged less than 65 years for the period from July 1989 to June 1996. The Port Arthur massacre that occurred in April 1996 resulted in 35 people being killed. One-quarter of the victims were aged 65 years and over. As this isolated incident may have a strong effect on homicide rates, the graph also shows victimisation rates excluding the Port Arthur massacre. Figure 1 shows that, after a slight decrease between July 1992 and June 1994, the victimisation rate of older people experienced a slight rise in 1994-95 followed by another rise in 1995-96, even after exclusion of the Port Arthur incident. On the other hand, the homicide rate among people aged less than 65 years has remained stable over the period under investigation.

In 164 cases, that is 6.8 per cent of all the homicides recorded during 1989-96, the victim was aged 65 years or over. The rarity of homicides on older people causes comparisons based on "crude" homicide rates to be misleading. Australian jurisdictions are different in terms of their relative numbers of people aged 65 years and over, especially the Northern Territory and the ACT where persons in this age group represent 3.4 and 7.2 per

cent of the total population respectively (ABS 1997). As a consequence, homicide rates for the Territories will be unusually high, even if they are based on a small number of victims. Table 1 shows some statistics on homicide against older people in the jurisdictions.

The largest number of homicides involving older people was observed in New South Wales followed by Victoria and Queensland. These three States contributed over three-quarters of all the homicides committed on people aged 65 years and over (refer to column 1 in Table 1). The figures in Table 1 show the Northern Territory as having the highest rate of homicide against older people in Australia. The unusually high rate for the Northern Territory reflects the overall higher rates of homicide in that jurisdiction. The Northern Territory contributed only 2.4 per cent of all the homicides against older people reported during the period and no homicides of this type occurred in the ACT.

Table 1 also shows that homicides against older people represent a small portion of all the homicides recorded in the jurisdictions (refer to column 2). The figures for Tasmania are affected by the fact that nearly one-quarter of the victims of the Port Arthur massacre was aged 65 years or over. The Northern Territory and the ACT appear as the jurisdictions where the number of homicides against older people is smallest relative to total homicides.

The "crude" rates (see column 3 in Table 1) do not account

for differences in the gender-age distribution of homicide mortality among older people. One way to control for such differences is by standardising the mortality rates. Column 4 in Table 1 shows standardised homicide rates based on the gender-age distribution of the homicides against older people observed for Australia as a whole. The figures show that even after controlling for difference in the gender-age composition of homicide against older people, the Northern Territory has the highest mortality (that is, almost 9 times the national average). The lowest relative rate of homicide against older people was obtained for Queensland (that is, about three-quarters of the national average).

### Comparisons with Homicide in the Rest of the Population

Table 2 summarises the main characteristics of homicide incidents and their victims classified according to whether or not an older person was involved. Bearing in mind the very small number of homicides involving older people, the Table shows that homicides involving older people are *more likely* than other homicides to:

- occur in the victim's/offender's home;
- be associated with mental disorder of the offender;
- occur in the course of robbery;
- be the result of an assault, either with hands, fist or feet, or a blunt instrument;
- be committed by a stranger;
- have a female as the victim;
- have a victim of Caucasian racial appearance; and
- involve a widowed victim.

On the other hand, Table 2 also shows that homicides on older people are *less likely* than other homicides to:

- take place on the street, or bush or other open areas;

**Table 1: AUSTRALIA, STATES AND TERRITORIES, 1989-96, Statistics related to homicides involving people aged 65 years and over**

Jurisdiction	Number and %	As % of Total Homicides	Rate per 100 000 Total Population (1)	Standardised Homicide Rate (1) (2)
	1	2	3	4
NSW	62 (37.8%)	7.5	1.21	1.07
Vic.	43 (26.2%)	9.3	1.16	1.01
Qld	21 (12.8%)	4.4	0.87	0.76
WA	11 (6.7%)	4.6	0.93	0.80
SA	13 (7.9%)	5.6	0.95	0.85
Tas. (3)	10 (6.1%)	12.8	2.49	2.22
NT	4 (2.4%)	2.8	11.43	8.79
ACT	0	0.0	0.00	0.00
<b>Australia</b>	<b>164 (100.0%)</b>	<b>6.8</b>	<b>1.14</b>	<b>1.00</b>

<sup>1</sup> Average for 7 years.

<sup>2</sup> Using the Australian sex-age distribution of homicides against older people as the standard.

For comparison purposes of death rates from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, it is useful to determine the differences between the rates if there were no differences in the age and sex composition. Rates that control for differences in the sex-age structure of two or more populations are called Standardised Mortality Rates (SMRs). The SMRs shown in Table 1 use the sex-age distribution of homicides against older people for the whole of Australia as the "standard". For each jurisdiction, the expected number of deaths is computed under the assumption that these homicides have the same sex-age structure as Australia. The SMR is then obtained as the quotient of the observed number of homicides and the expected number of homicides. Jurisdictions with SMRs greater than 1 have homicide against older people larger than the national average, while those where the SMR is smaller than 1 have homicide against older people smaller than the national average.

<sup>3</sup> Exclusion of the Port Arthur massacre leaves Tasmania with a rate of 0.5 homicides against older people per 100 000 total population, which is lower than the rate observed for the other jurisdictions.

- occur during the night (that is from 6 pm to 6 am);
- result from disputes due to matters of a domestic nature, jealousy or termination of an intimate relationship;
- involve victims of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander racial appearance;
- involve victims who are under the influence of alcohol at the time of the incident;
- have a person who has never been married as the victim; and
- have victims with a previous criminal record.

### Older People as Victims of Homicide

Our findings thus far suggest that homicides involving older people possess some characteristics that make them qualitatively different from homicides occurring in the rest of the population. The following discussion focuses on the

main features of the homicide involving victims aged 65 years and over. One must nevertheless be cautious about reading too much into these data. Based as they are on a relatively small number of homicides (n=164) occurring over a seven-year period, they do not permit definitive generalisations.

There are a number of factors that enhance the security of older Australians, and others that enhance the risk of homicide victimisation. The typical individual's life cycle in contemporary Australia, as in most affluent societies, makes for different lifestyles between age cohorts. Research by Clarke (1990) suggests that the relatively low risk of crime victimisation of older people essentially reflects their lifestyle patterns. Their relative low risk of victimisation would also appear to be influenced by the persons with whom they choose to associate, and the routine activities in which they engage. Although limited by their bivariate nature, the figures in Table 2 seem to support this

**Table 2: AUSTRALIA, 1989-96, Homicides involving older victims compared with other homicides, incident characteristics, victim characteristics and victim-offender relationship**

	Percentage	
	Homicides Involving Older People	Other Homicides
<b>INCIDENT CHARACTERISTICS</b>		
<b>Location</b>		
Victim's/Offender's home	81.7**	52.6
Places of Entertainment	1.2	5.3
Street/Bush/Open Areas	5.5**	22.0
<b>Time of the Day</b>		
Night-time (6 pm – 6 am)	49.4**	60.7
<b>Context</b>		
Dispute relating to matters of a domestic nature or jealousy or termination of an intimate relationship	17.6**	34.8
Dispute precipitated by alcohol	3.2**	15.2
Mental disorder of the offender	16.8**	3.8
Sexual Assault	4.0	3.6
Robbery	24.8**	5.6
Suicide pact	5.6	0.5
<b>Weapon/Method Used</b>		
Firearm	19.3	26.4
Assault/Blunt instrument	41.2**	27.1
Sharp instrument	23.2	32.4
Strangulation	12.4	6.1
<b>RELATIONSHIP OF VICTIM TO OFFENDER</b>		
Intimate partners	21.0	28.7
Family other than intimate	27.1	16.3
Friend/acquaintance	26.3	35.6
Stranger	21.2**	13.0
<b>VICTIM CHARACTERISTICS</b>		
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	49.0**	36.6
<b>Racial Appearance</b>		
Caucasian	94.0**	75.0
Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander	2.4**	13.4
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Never married	12.8**	38.6
Married/de facto	38.4	34.6
Separated/divorced	6.7	11.8
Widowed	42.0**	15.1
<b>Other Characteristics</b>		
Under influence of alcohol at time of incident	7.9**	31.0
Under influence of illicit or prescription drugs at time of incident	2.4	3.2
Previous criminal record	3.6**	17.1

\*\*The percentage for homicide incidents involving older people is statistically different from the per cent for homicides of the rest of the population (p<0.1).

hypothesis, as homicides committed on older people are more likely than other homicides to occur in the intimacy of a home. Results also indicate that homicides against older people involve females more frequently than do other homicides.

The figures in Table 3 show that among females, the age-adjusted homicide rate remains relatively stable for ages between 65 and 79 years, and are lower than male rates. Note that there is

a sharp increase in victimisation rates for ages starting at 80 years, both for males and females. However, male and female rates vary differently with age. Male rates drop by almost half for people in the 70-74 year group and start to increase for ages over 74 years. Apart from the 65-69

year age group, the male homicide rate increases with age.<sup>1</sup>

These results suggest that homicide victimisation among older people is far from being homogeneous, and that may be affected by a number of factors. One will note that differential life expectancy will affect the incidence and rate of homicide victimisation involving persons aged 65 years and over. Women, in general, live longer than men do. While in the oldest age cohort (85 years and over), the number of female victims is nearly twice that of male victims, the male homicide rate (because of the smaller base population) is approximately 30 per cent higher.

The U-shaped age pattern of male homicide rates and the sharp increase in victimisation rates for ages over 79 years raise a number of issues. We have already found that homicides against older people are more likely than homicides against other age groups to be committed by strangers, either in the course of a robbery or by assaulting a female victim (*refer to* Table 2). In general, the figures in Table 3, together with those in Table 2, seem to support an explanation of risk in terms of vulnerability (Silverman & Kennedy 1993).

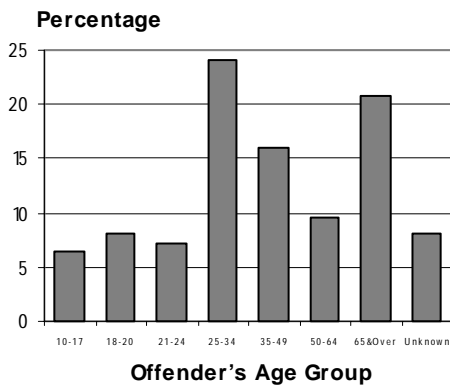
### Comparing Victims and Offenders

Males committed the majority of homicides involving people over the age of 65-years. In 43 per cent of these homicides both the victim and the offender were male, while in 45 per cent of these incidents, the victim was a female and the offender was a male. Females perpetrated only 5 per cent of homicides against older people.

Also, about four out of five offenders of homicide against older people were younger than their victims (*see* Figure 2). Offenders aged 25-34 years,

<sup>1</sup> The age pattern of homicide rates among older people in Australia seems to be different from other countries. Fox and Levin (1991) found that in the United States, the homicide rate for older males begins to plateau at the age of 65, and that male and female rates converge because of lifestyle changes in the male role (p. 319).

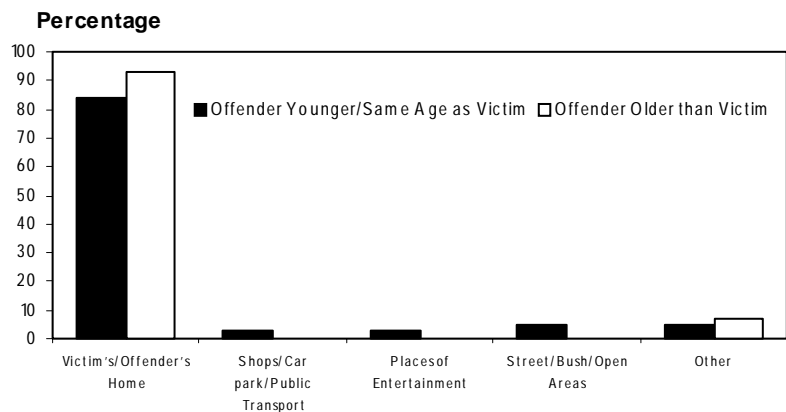
**Figure 2: AUSTRALIA, 1989-96**  
Distribution of homicides against older people according to offender's age



followed by those aged 65 years and over more frequently commit this type of homicide. These results confirm the heterogeneity in homicide against older people referred to previously. It might be argued that homicides against older people where the offender is younger than the victim differ from those occurring between persons of similar ages. It is reasonable to associate homicides against older people perpetrated by people aged less than 65 years with victim's vulnerability. In addition, homicides with both victim and offender being aged 65 years or over may be related to lifestyle. Classification of homicides against older people into two groups according to offender's age may help in separating the effects that lifestyle and vulnerability seem to have on this type of killing.

Figures 3 to 5 display the distribution of homicides against older people according to location of incident, the circumstances associated with the incident and the relationship of the victim to the offender. Victimisations are grouped according to the relation between the ages of the victim and the offender. Despite the small numbers of homicides involving offenders older than victims, the graphs in Figures 3 to 5 provide some interesting insights. Note that homicides against older people tend to occur in a dwelling irrespective of the relation of offender's age to victim's age (see Figure 3). With regard to the circumstances surrounding the incident, homicides

**Figure 3: AUSTRALIA, 1989-96, Percentage distribution of homicides involving older people according to age of victim and offender location of incident**



with an offender younger than the victim tend to be associated with robbery, and altercations of both domestic and non-domestic nature (see Figure 4). Incidents where the offender was older than the victim related mostly to mental disorder of the offender and domestic disputes (see Figure 4). Finally, as shown by Figure 5, for homicides against older people involving offenders younger than victims, the victim-offender relationship could be any of family, friends/acquaintances, or strangers. On the other hand, for homicides with offenders older than victims, the dominant relationship was intimate partners.

These results are indicative of the complexity of homicide involving people aged 65 years and over. They are consistent with findings of American studies. The research of Messner and Tardiff (1985), and Cohen and Felson (1979) suggests that because older people spend more time in their homes and interact

primarily with family members, they more often than others will be killed in or near their homes. Our results show that older people seem to be equally as likely to be killed by a family member, a friend/acquaintance or a stranger. Homicide involving older people is highly associated with robberies and altercations (domestic and general). Fox and Levin (1991) found that older robbery victims are at greater risk than their younger counterparts of dying in the incident, which is explained by their physical vulnerability. Our results also show that *perpetrators* of homicide against older Australians are likely to be family members or close friends, which is consistent with previous research findings (Fox & Levin 1991).

One also notes that the mental disorder of the offender is more predominant in homicides against older victims than in homicides involving younger people (refer to Table 2). This

**Table 3: AUSTRALIA, 1989-96, Gender-age distribution and rates per 100 000 of older victims of homicide**

Gender of Victim	Age Group of Older Victims					Total
	65-69	70-74	75-79	80-84	85 & Over	
NUMBERS						
Male	40	16	12	9	7	84
Female	21	18	13	15	13	80
Persons	61	34	25	24	20	164
PERCENTAGE						
Male	65.6	47.1	48.0	37.5	35.0	51.2
Female	34.4	52.9	52.0	62.5	65.0	48.8
Persons	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
RATES PER 100 000 POPULATION						
Male	1.74	0.92	1.04	1.38	1.99	1.36
Female	0.85	0.85	0.80	1.36	1.53	0.98
Persons	1.28	0.89	0.90	1.37	1.67	1.14

**Figure 4: AUSTRALIA, 1989-96, Percentage distribution of homicides involving older people according to age of victim and offender circumstances associated with the incident**



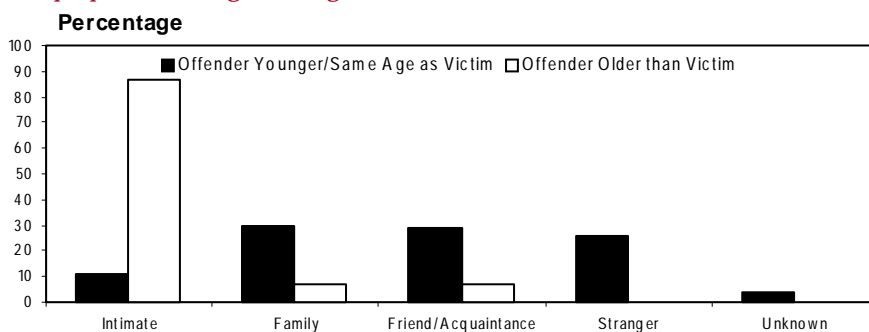
might reflect some combination of their exposure to persons (including family members) with mental health problems, combined with the victim's own physical frailties.

### Policy Implications

Homicide of older Australians is a rare occurrence, both in absolute terms and relative to other risks faced by older people. While this does not diminish the seriousness of those cases which do occur, there are few policy options that could be directed specifically at reducing homicide risk among people aged 65 years and over. Basic information on the relative infrequency of homicide against older Australians might help allay unwarranted anxieties.

Those factors that differentiate homicides involving people aged 65 years and over from those committed against younger persons would tend to reflect differences in lifestyle. Persons over 65 are less likely to engage in risk-taking behaviour – the kind of behaviour which can lead younger people into harm's way.

**Figure 5: AUSTRALIA, 1989-96, Percentage distribution of homicides involving older people, according to the age of victim and offender victim-offender relationship**



Older people are victims of homicide most often as a result of assault in their own homes. It therefore appears that the home is the most likely setting for homicides against older people and that disputes with family members can lead to homicides in this age group. Dealing with family members with mental health problems is an area requiring further attention. Robbery by strangers may also enhance the risk of fatal consequences.

Clearly, isolation of older people may enhance the risk of their victimisation by homicide as well as by lesser offences. A greater degree of social integration would serve to empower older people and to increase awareness of options regarding their circumstances. More active involvement in the community would increase their self-confidence and reduce feelings of dependency. This would, in turn, lead to easier access to relevant services and support.

The revolution in technology that we are currently experiencing will, in the fullness of time, contribute significantly to enhan-

cing the quality of life of older Australians, and to enhancing their safety as well. As new telecommunications technologies become more accessible to senior citizens, their isolation may be expected to diminish. Security technology, including low cost alarm systems, will also become more widely accessible, providing older Australians with a degree of assurance not previously available.

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Carlos Carcach and Marianne James are Research Analysts, and Dr Peter Grabosky is Director of Research, Australian Institute of Criminology



General Editor, Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice series:  
Dr Adam Graycar, Director  
Australian Institute of Criminology  
GPO Box 2944  
Canberra ACT 2601 Australia

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