

EXPLORING THE APOCALYPTIC SOLUTION:

HOMICIDE-SUICIDE AS A DECISION MAKING PROCESS

“The neighbours are all shocked. They’re respectable people, they go to church.”

-- Neighbour of a family in which two brothers were involved in a homicide-suicide (The Age, 2001)

RESEARCH INTEREST

- Unusual variant of homicide
- Consistencies and inconsistencies with other theories of homicide and suicide
- Considered to be a rather different offender population drawn more from the mainstream of society (more middle-class, middle-aged, employed, non-criminal perpetrators)

BACKGROUND STUDIES

PREVIOUS WORK IN HOMICIDE-SUICIDE

- Empirical studies: the epidemiology of the event (who, what, when, to whom)
(West, 1965; Marzuk, Tardiff and Hirsch, 1992; Wallace, 1986)
- 'Segmented' studies:
 - o Intimate partner only/gender/feminist approaches: Lund and Smorodinsky (2001); Barnes (1995); Dratsas (1995)
 - o Psychiatric/Mental health approaches: West (1965); Starzomski and Nussbaum (2000); Hillbrand (2001).

AN ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORK

- Durkheim: *Suicide*

Approach based on the individual and society.
Similarities with altruistic suicide.

- Douglas: ‘*ascribed hierarchy*’

Human responses to the pollution of cherished systems of order.

- Baechler: *Suicides*

Approach based on individual personality and decision-making.

Homicide-suicide as a final step on a decision-making continuum (the apocalyptic scenario)

RESEARCH QUESTION

Given the impression of a perpetrator 'embedded' within cultural norms and social systems of control, how can these concepts provide an explanatory link between society and the homicide-suicide event?

METHODOLOGY

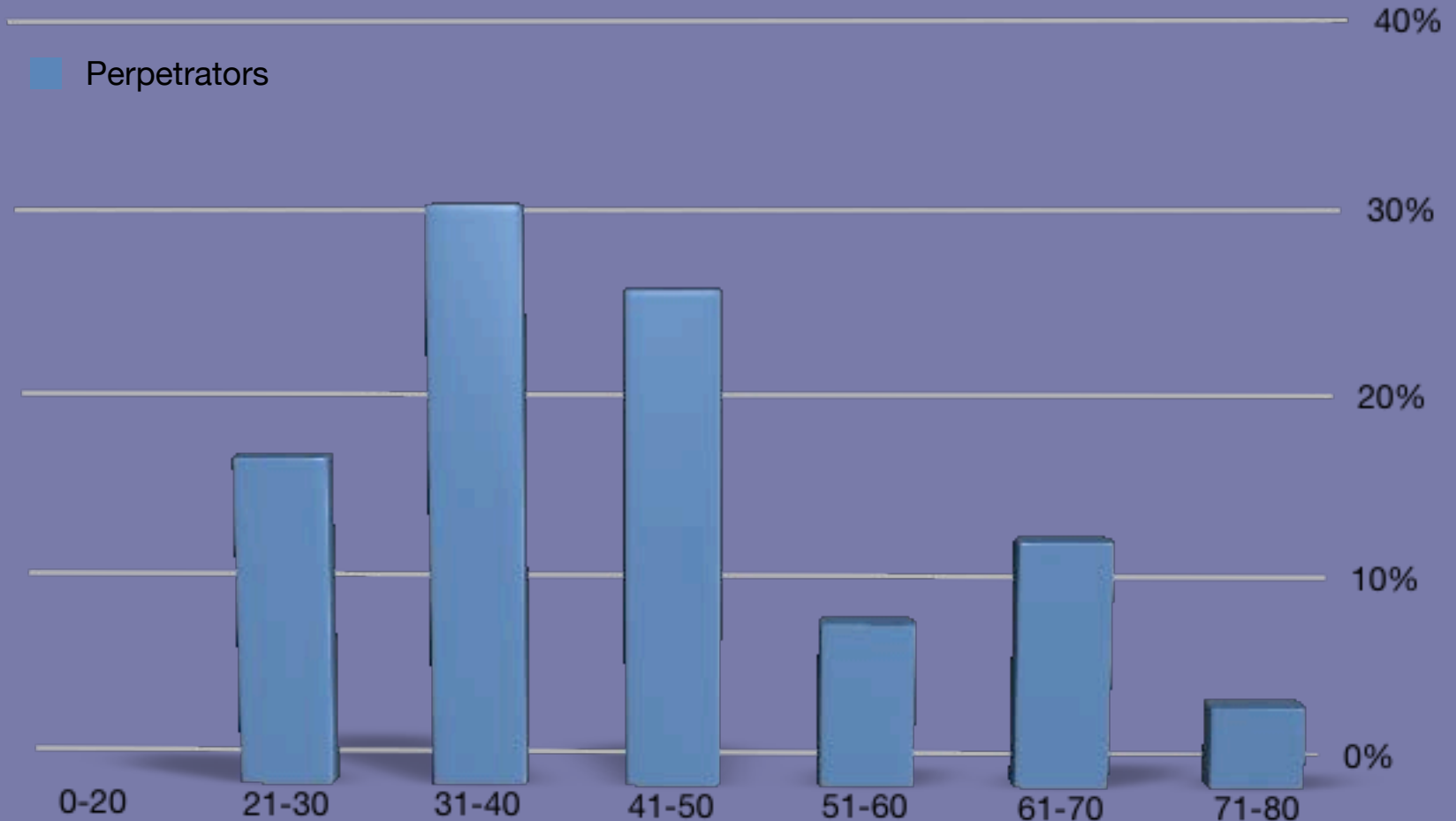
- Multiple descriptive case study
- Cases from the Coroner's Court (victim based documents covering all individuals involved).
1995-2002
- Operational definition: Perpetrator killing one or more others and then killing themselves within a twenty-four hour time frame, within Victoria.
- n=24 (three cases were excluded)
- Both descriptive quantitative and qualitative data were collected
- Analysis through examination of basic descriptive quantitative statistics; pattern matching and content analysis of case studies.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PERPETRATORS

- Consistent findings with previous studies
- Average age was 44.9 years across sample
- 83% married
- 87.5% male
- 45% employed, 13% self-employed
- 96% appear to have mental health issues or psychological distress
- most perpetrators unaffected by drugs or alcohol

CHARACTERISTICS OF PERPETRATORS

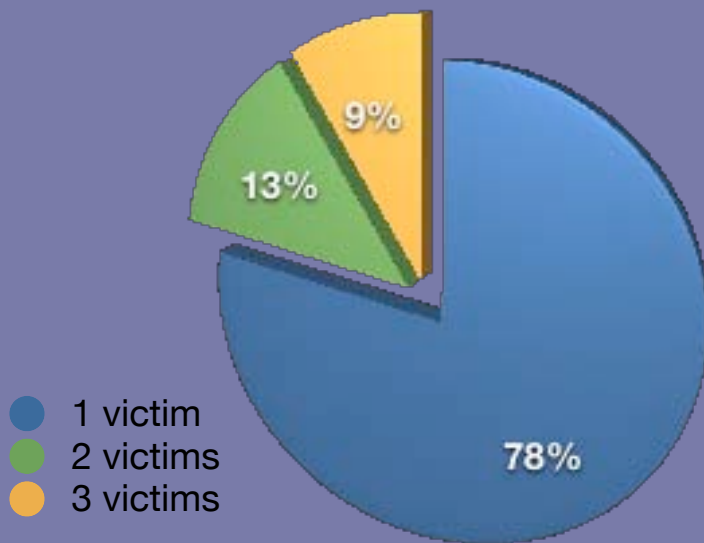
AGE IN YEARS



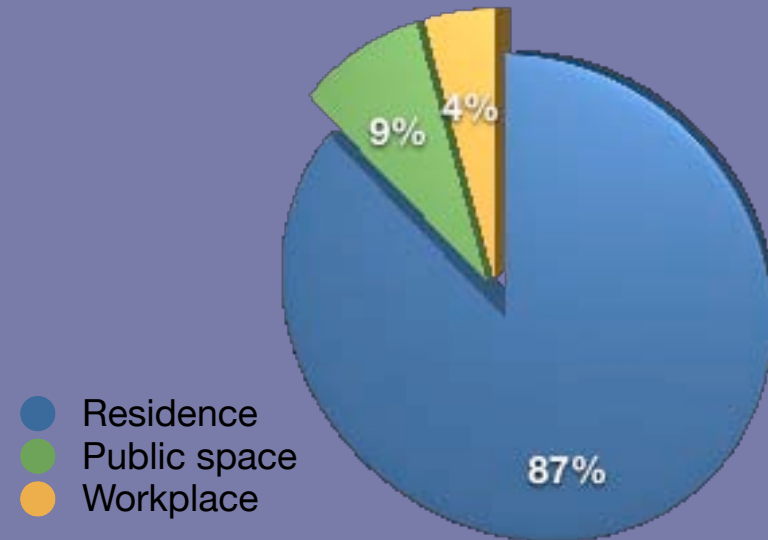
INCIDENT CHARACTERISTICS

NO. OF VICTIMS, LOCATION IN DOMESTIC H-S

Percentage of victims per homicide-suicide incident

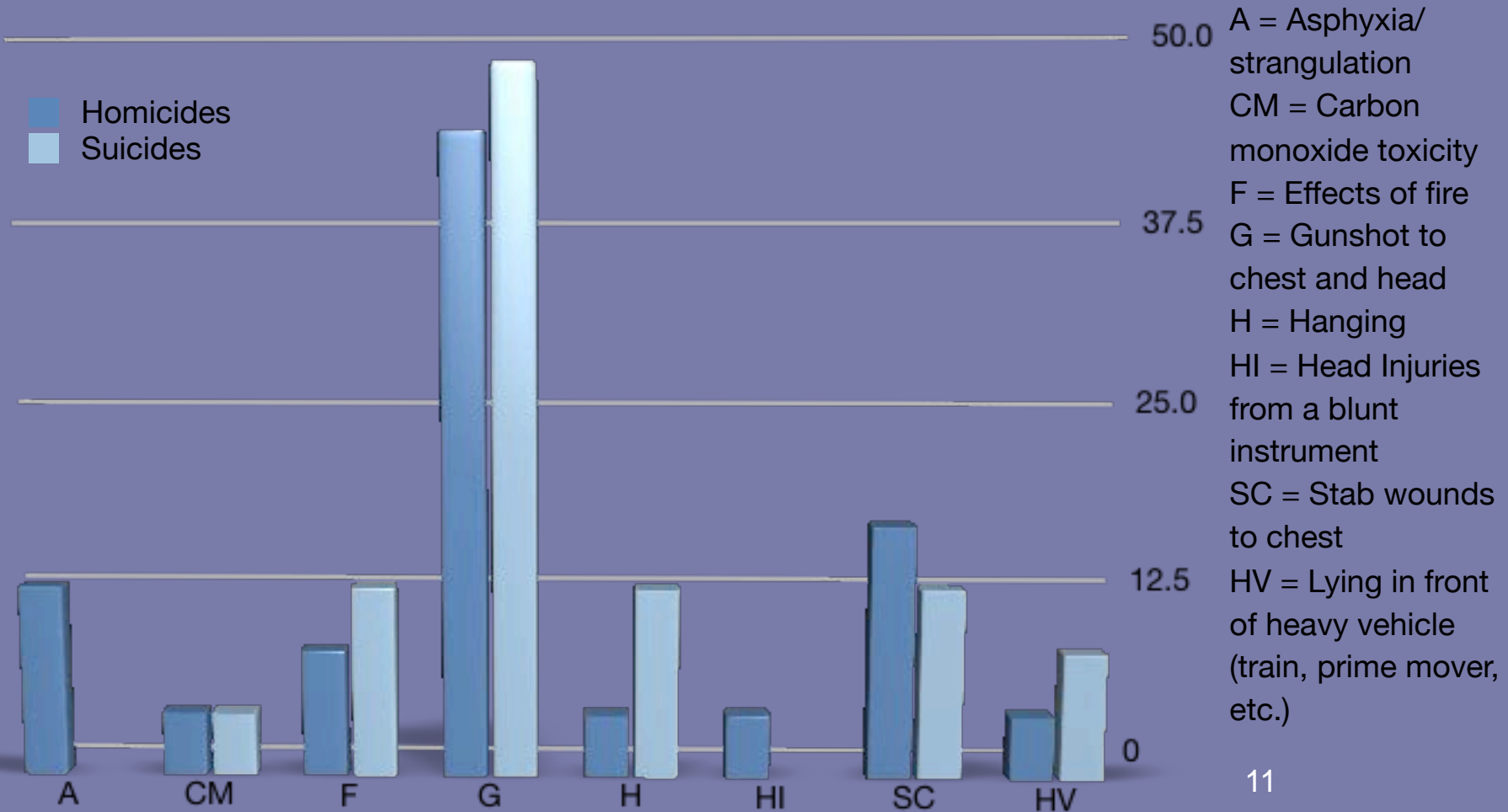


Location of homicide-suicide incidents



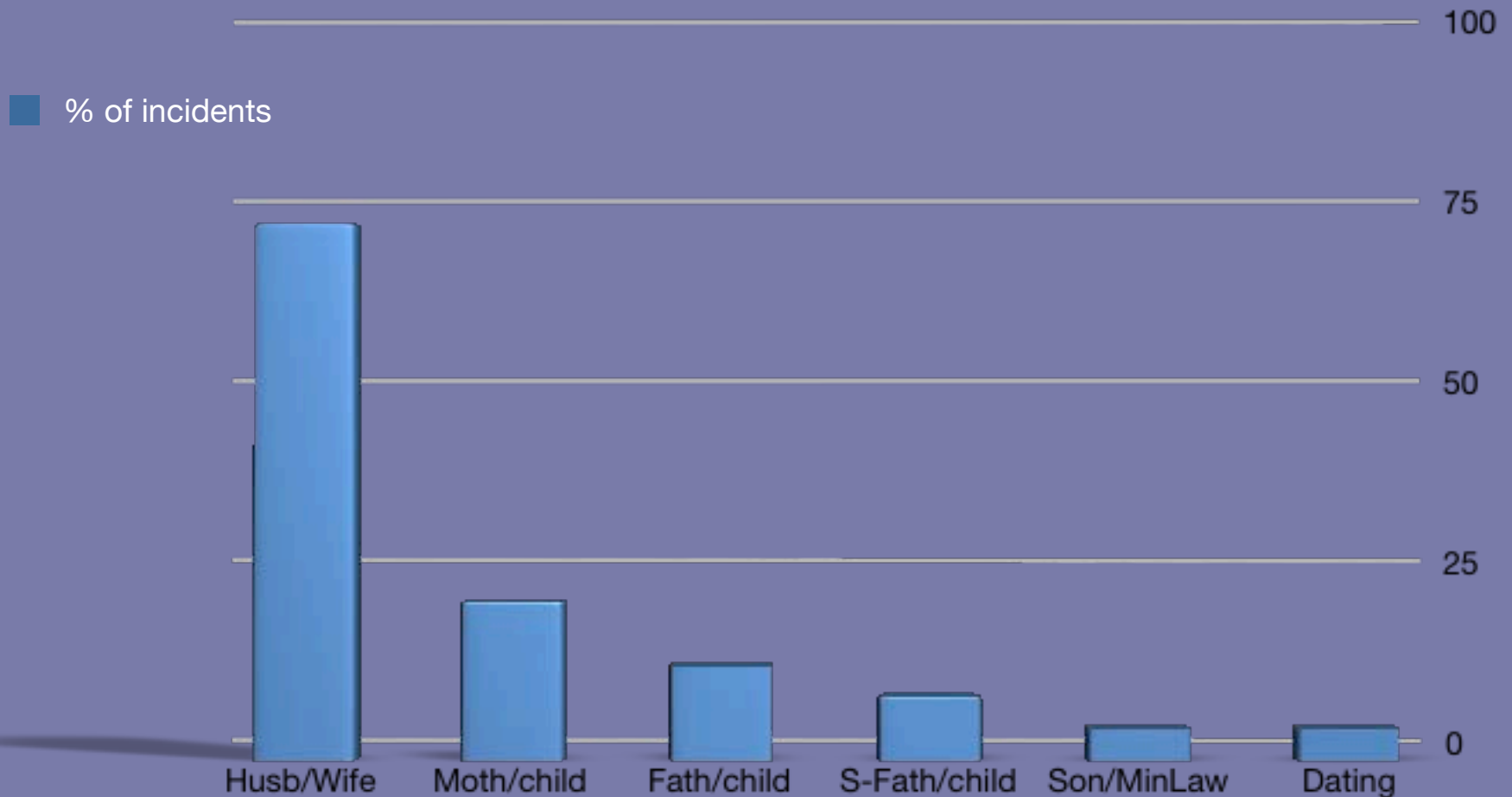
INCIDENT CHARACTERISTICS

METHOD OF KILLINGS



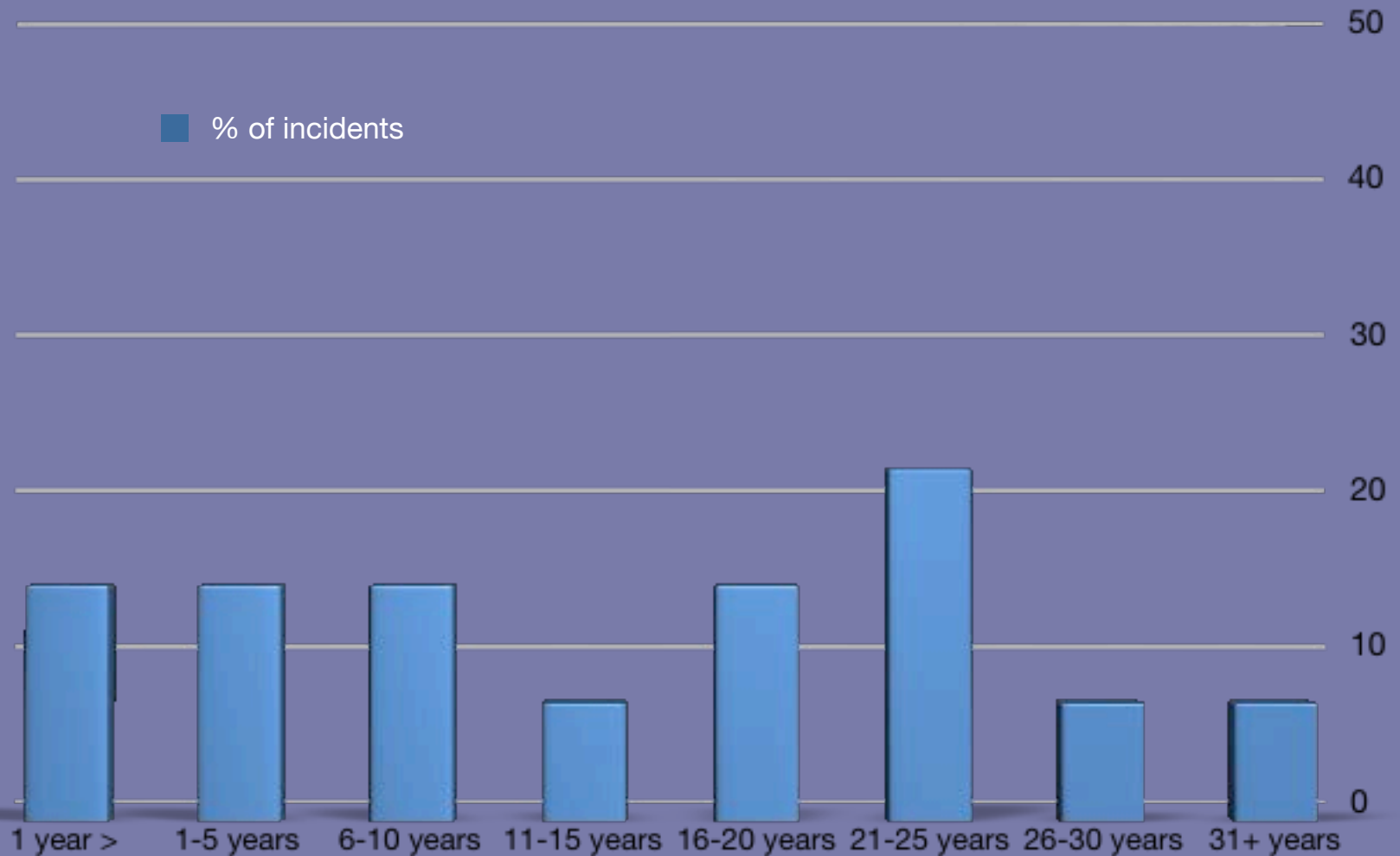
INCIDENT CHARACTERISTICS

RELATIONSHIP IN DOMESTIC RELATED H-S



INCIDENT CHARACTERISTICS

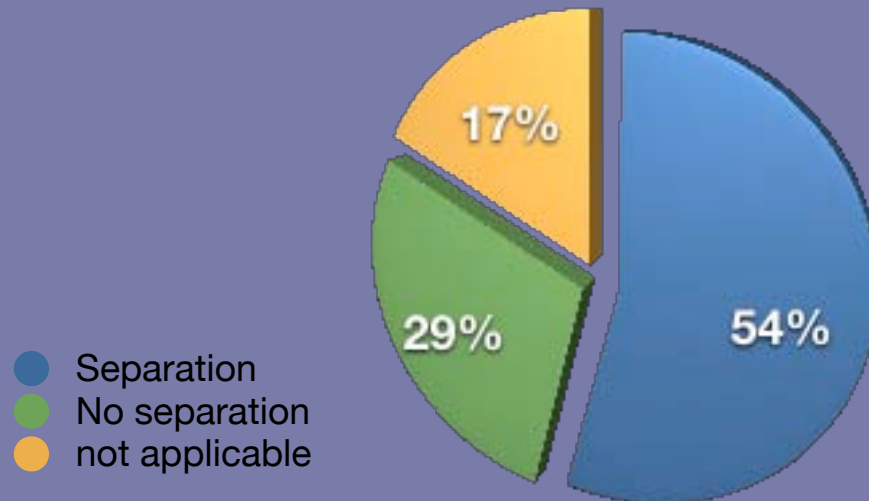
LENGTH OF RELATIONSHIP



INCIDENT CHARACTERISTICS

SEPARATION

Percentage of incidents involving actual or threatened separation of intimate partners



CASE VIGNETTE 17

A husband and wife had a history of extreme conflict in their marriage that was getting worse. The marriage had lasted for the sake of their 18 year old son, but had deteriorated and both had had enough of the situation. The husband reportedly had a short temper and the wife would stir him into arguments. The couple worked together, and he was extremely and irrationally jealous of her, believing her to have affairs with impossible numbers of people (including relatives and workmates). Wills had been made in the weeks previously along with power of attorney arrangements. He was thought to have become depressed, and the night before asked his son: "So it would be better if I was dead, would it" before telling him he loved him. The next day both parents stayed home from work. The husband then shot the wife in the head with a rifle, called his parents to pick-up the son and come over, and then shot himself in the head.

REVERSALS OF TRADITIONAL OR EXPECTED GENDER ROLES

- Not all acts in line with traditional gendered findings of homicide suicide
- men acting out of compassion and love for their children as part of their caring and nurturing role
- women acting in typically male-style situations:
 - maintaining domination and control of family members
 - physically and emotionally abusive history towards male partners, H-S in response to separation
 - Aiming to hurt an abandoning partner during separation by H-S with their children following attempts to exert control as the partner attempt to leave

CASE VIGNETTE 9

In this case a woman killed her husband and two small children in an attempt to stop her elder son from playing any part in the family. She was a matriarch and had total control of the family financially and socially. Her husband had a breakdown years previously and had been told to leave if he questioned her decisions. The son was thrown out of home and the mother proceeded to exclude him from all members of the family. The son was served with an intervention order after seeing his younger brother and sister at school. An arrangement was reached in court that the son would have supervised contact with the children, due to start the next day. Mother was referred to as 'mad' by her own legal counsel, and told people that if she lost the case she would appeal and then go interstate. Also stated the son "had won now". That night accelerants were spread around the house, ignited, and all four died of smoke inhalation.

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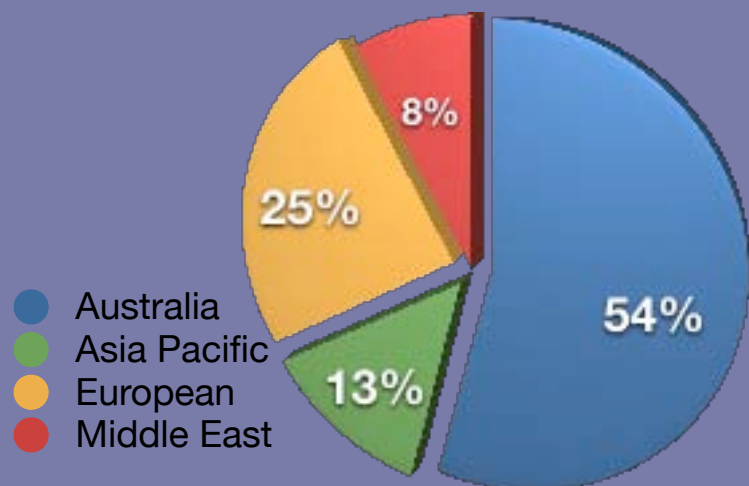
COMMON ANTECEDENTS

- financial failure/loss of occupation or professional failure
- marital conflict
 - “Marriage is sacred. I love [the victim] deeply.”
- separation
- premeditation

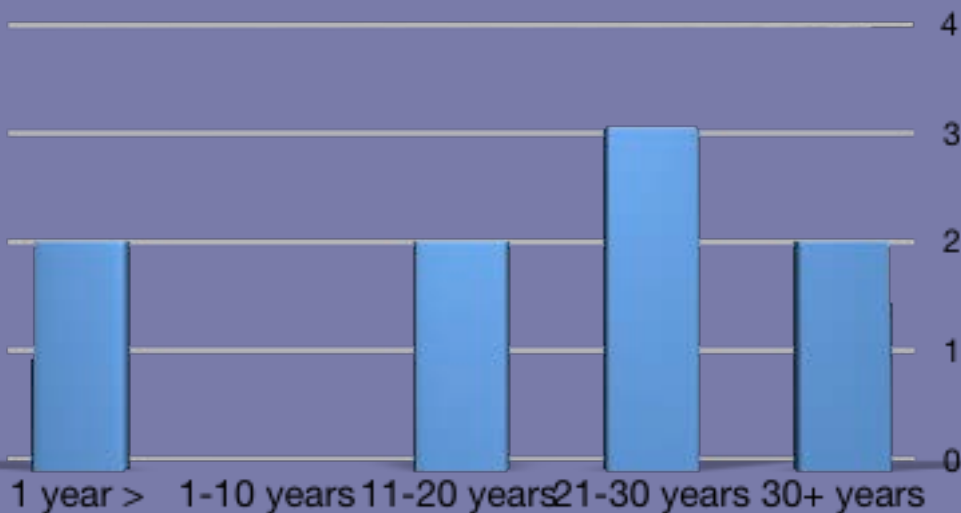
SOCIO-CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS

REGION OF BIRTH AND YEARS IN AUSTRALIA

Percentage of incidents involving actual or threatened separation of intimate partners



Number of perpetrators by length of Australian residency



CASE VIGNETTE 21

A husband and wife, having a history of violence and conflict had decided upon divorce and agreed upon terms of a settlement. The wife was confused about why the divorce was being rushed through and would not grant the husband a quick divorce so he could re-marry in Lebanon. He did not cope with the divorce and became obsessed with the financial arrangements, deciding he would try his luck with the courts saying he would do something bad to both of them if unsuccessful in life after. He said to a son that he had read about men who killed their wives and themselves after being treated unfairly in divorce cases. He had previously threatened her publicly (“you’ll die burning”) and had behaved unusually for the previous few days.

Christmas night, he threw petrol over his wife, and set fire to them both with a cigarette lighter. A son was injured trying to stop the father from setting her alight.

CONCLUSION

- HIERARCHIES OF CONTROL AND REGULATION
 - Both social and familial and can therefore work within or against gender constructs depending on the individual and the elements that define the ascribed hierarchy and the conflict that arises with perceived roles.

CONCLUSION

The homicide-suicides examined did show a narrative of problem-solving:

an individual, influenced by **various factors contributing** to a stressful/crisis situation, comes to a **decision to take the planned action** of the homicide-suicide act in order to **exercise their role** in a hierarchical power structure which may or may not be shared with others and may be of the perpetrator's construction