



No.82

Murder-Suicide in Australia

Carlos Carcach and P.N. Grabosky

Homicide is a relatively infrequent event in Australia, and homicides followed by the suicide of the perpetrator occur about twenty times each year. Analyses of these cases, however, can be instructive. This Trends and Issues paper shows that most murder-suicides in Australia occur in the context of intimate and/or family relationships, and are more likely to involve firearms than are other categories of homicide. It suggests that policies designed to lessen the stresses occasioned by family dissolution, and to limit access to firearms by inappropriate persons may contribute to a reduction of murder-suicide, as well as to a reduction of the more common manifestations of violence in Australia.

Adam Graycar
Director

This paper explores the phenomenon of murder-suicide in Australia. The term "murder-suicide" refers to incidents in which an offender takes his or her own life after having killed one or more victims, either immediately or within a very short period of time after the incident, normally no more than 24 hours.

The data on which this article is based were collected as part of the National Homicide Monitoring Program at the Australian Institute of Criminology. Established in 1989, this program routinely collects data on some 47 variables relating to each incident of homicide coming to police attention in Australia, and includes data relating to the victim, the suspect or perpetrator (where one has been identified) and the setting or context within which the incident occurs, including time, location, and weapon employed. Data are extracted by Institute staff from the homicide case records of each State and Territory police agency in Australia. 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 involve more than one victim and/or perpetrator. Moreover, these totals may differ slightly from those derived from other data bases, such as those relating to vital statistics and causes of death. These marginal differences are unlikely to detract significantly from the comparisons made and the inferences drawn.

Of all homicide incidents recorded for the seven-year period under analysis, 144 or 6.5 per cent are classified as murder-suicides. In total, 160 offenders committed suicide following homicide. However, 16 of these cases occurred as part of incidents judged to have involved a suicide pact, and therefore they are excluded from the analysis.¹

¹ This is consistent with the operational definition of murder-suicide used in other studies (see Stack 1997).

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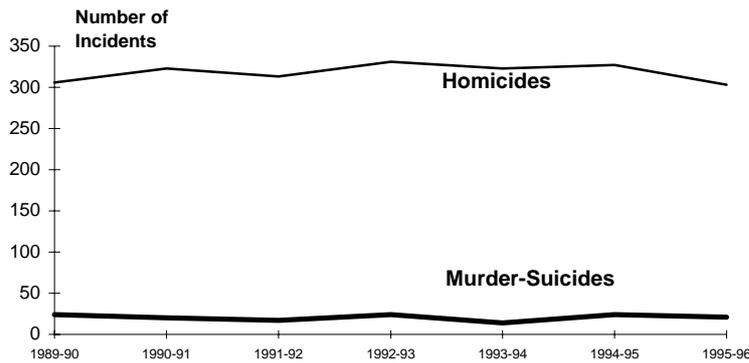
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Figure 1: AUSTRALIA, Homicide incidents and murder-suicide incidents, 1 July 1989-30 June 1996



As Figure 1 shows, the incidence of murder-suicide has remained relatively stable during the seven-year period covered by this study and has oscillated between a low of 14 incidents in 1993-94 and a high of 24 incidents during each of the financial years 1989-90, 1992-93 and 1994-95. Of all the offenders involved in the homicide incidents occurring during the period from 1989 to 1996, 5.5 per cent committed suicide.

Murder-suicide incidents involved 190 victims, or an average 1.32 victims per incident. This is higher than for other types of homicides, where there were 1.07 victims per incident on average.

The fact that murder-suicide incidents tend to involve more victims than other homicide incidents raises the issue of whether the incidence of multiple-victim murder-suicides is increasing, decreasing, or has remained stable during the seven-year period under study. As can be seen from Table 1, the average number of victims per murder-suicide incident shows no definite trend and it has oscillated between a low of 1.14 during 1993-94 and a high of 1.53 during 1991-92.

Seventy-nine per cent of murder-suicides involved one victim and one offender only. The remaining 20 per cent involved one offender and multiple victims. The largest number of

victims per incident is seven, which occurred as a result of the Strathfield incident in 1991.

There is not a great deal of comparative perspective on murder-suicide. Stack's (1997) study of murder-suicide in Chicago over a 25-year period (1965-1990) identified 265 cases, or 1.6 per cent of all Chicago homicides, where the perpetrator took his or her own life. This is a significantly lower proportion than that which has been reported in Canada and the United Kingdom, where a little less than one-tenth and one-third of all homicides respectively, were followed by suicide (West 1967; Goldney 1977; Statistics Canada 1990-96). Evidence suggests that generally, nations with a high homicide rate have a relatively small proportion of homicides followed by suicide (Coid 1983; Milroy 1995). This is consistent with the Australian data.

Figure 2 confirms this trend for the States and Territories of Australia. The Northern Territory, which has the highest homicide rate in the nation, had no murder-suicides at all. For the remaining jurisdictions, as the homicide rate decreases, the proportion of murder-suicides tends to increase.

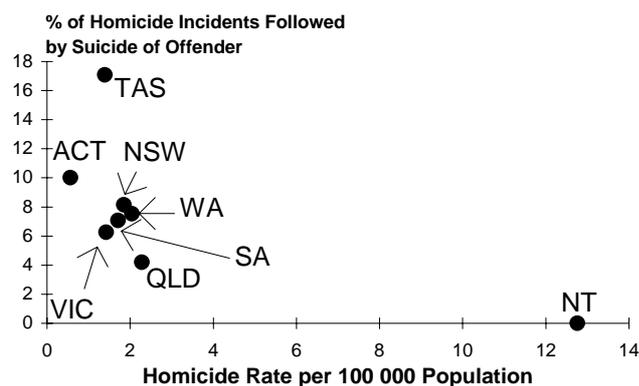
A Typology of Murder-Suicide

The literature reports on at least two criteria to classify murder-suicides. Felthous and Hampel (1995) proposed a classification based on psychopathological considerations. They also used a classification based on relationships which incorporates those proposed by Marzuk (Marzuk et al. 1992), Dietz (1986) and the FBI's classification of homicides for investigative purposes (Douglas et al. 1992).

None of these typologies could be applied with complete success to Australian murder-suicide data. Firstly, there was not enough information to classify murder-suicides according to psychopathological concepts. A significant number of Australian murder-suicides which occurred during the period 1989-96 were classified by police as "mental disorder".

Secondly, it was not feasible to use classifications developed for investigative purposes.

Figure 2: AUSTRALIA, Homicide rates per 100 000 and percentage of homicide incidents followed by suicide of offender, by jurisdiction, 1 July 1989 to 30 June 1996



Research suggests that most murder-suicides do not occur during the commission of other crimes (Smith & Parker 1980). The data show that this is also very much the case for Australia as there were only three murder-suicides occurring in the context of other crimes, namely robbery or sexual assault.

A typology of murder-suicides based on relationships is more feasible. We have attempted to classify murder-suicides according to the relationship between victim and offender. As Figure 3 shows, two-thirds of murder-suicides involved people in a family setting, especially partners.

The most common type of murder-suicide is that involving current or former partners (43 per cent of murder-suicides), followed by that of a parent killing his/her children (14 per cent of murder-suicides). A further 6 per cent involve the killing of both partners and children. These three types of murder-suicide involve a male more frequently than a female offender.

Murder-suicides can also be classified according to the context surrounding the incident and/or the motive of the perpetrator. However, this classification is not free of problems because of the lack of sufficiently detailed information on the motives leading to the incident. Our

Figure 3: AUSTRALIA, Distribution of murder-suicide incidents according to the relationship of offender to the victim (N=144), 1 July 1989 to 30 June 1996

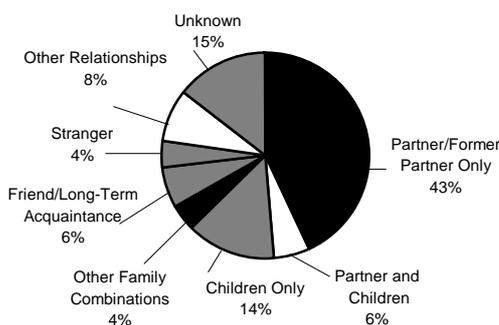


Table 1: AUSTRALIA, Murder-suicide incidents, number of incidents and distribution by number of victims involved, 1 July 1989 to 30 June 1996

Year	Number of incidents	Average number of victims per incident	Number of victims per incident			
			One	Two	Three	Four or more
1989-90	24	1.29	19	3	2	0
1990-91	20	1.35	15	3	2	0
1991-92	17	1.53	13	3	0	1
1992-93	24	1.17	20	4	0	0
1993-94	14	1.14	12	2	0	0
1994-95	24	1.29	19	4	0	1
1995-96	21	1.48	16	3	1	1
Total	144	1.32	114	22	5	3

classification should therefore be considered as generally indicative rather than definitive. Based on judgmental coding from information in police records, Figure 4 shows that nearly 70 per cent of all murder-suicides occur in the context of disputes relating to termination of a relationship, jealousy or other domestic matters. The most common situation surrounding a murder-suicide relates to disputes over the termination of a relationship.

These results show that murder-suicides tend to involve people who know each other, and suggest that the closer the relationship between offender and victim, the greater the likelihood that the perpetrator will suicide. It might be noted that relatively few murder-suicides occur in the context of "spree killings" such as the Queen Street (1987) and Strathfield (1991) incidents.

The Characteristics of Murder-Suicides

Victim characteristics

The victim of a murder-suicide incident is more likely to be a female Caucasian, aged about 33 years, and more likely to be working (see Table 2).

Offender characteristics

The perpetrator of a murder-suicide incident is more likely to be a male Caucasian, aged about 40 years, and more likely to be working (see Table 2).

Weapon

A weapon was used in 80 per cent of all the murder-suicide incidents that occurred during the seven years from 1 July 1989 to 30 June 1996. Firearms were the most commonly used weapon; in fact, in little less than 60 per cent of murder-suicides the offender used a firearm (James & Carcach 1997). This contrasts with other homicide incidents where only 19 per cent involved the use of firearms.

Sharp instruments were the second most common method/weapon used to commit murder-suicides. In 18 per cent of the murder-suicide incidents, the

Figure 4: AUSTRALIA, Distribution of murder-suicides according to context of the incident, (N=144) 1 July 1989 to 30 June 1996

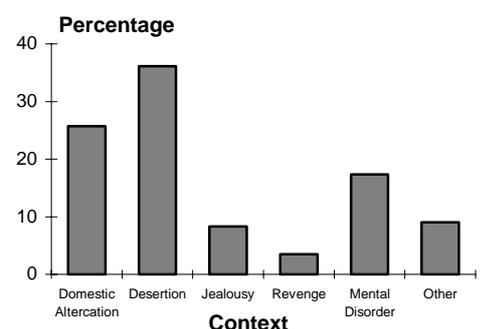


Table 2: AUSTRALIA, Murder-suicide compared to other homicides, incident and victim-offender characteristics, 1 July 1989 to 30 June 1996

Characteristics	Percentage of all incidents	
	Murder-suicides	Other homicides
Incident Characteristics		
Took place in New South Wales	**42.4	31.8
Took place in Queensland	13.2	21.9
Took place in the Northern Territory	0.0	7.2
Occurred at the victim's/offender's home	70.1	56.5
Offender used a firearm	**59.7	18.6
Relationship of victim to offender		
Child	**17.4	3.7
Spouse ⁽¹⁾	**33.3	16.0
Former spouse ⁽²⁾	**22.9	5.8
Other family member	6.9	11.4
Boyfriend/girlfriend	1.4	1.9
Offender Characteristics		
Male	91.4	81.0
Caucasian	87.1	69.3
Not working	27.3	46.2
Born in Australia	54.0	70.0
Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander	2.2	17.3
Under the influence of alcohol at the time of the incident	**15.1	39.9
Previous criminal record	18.0	36.4
Mean age (years)	39.6	31.1
Victim characteristics		
Female	73.6	33.0
Caucasian	86.1	74.9
Not working	17.4	33.2
Born in Australia	58.3	70.3
Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander	2.1	15.1
Under the influence of alcohol at the time of the incident	**6.3	35.0
Previous criminal record	4.2	17.9
Mean age (years)	33.2	34.6

(1) Husband/ wife or defacto

(2) Separated husband/ wife, divorced, ex-defacto or former girlfriend/boyfriend

** The percentage for murder-suicide incidents is statistically different from the percentage for other types of homicide incidents ($p < 0.01$).

offender resorted to this type of weapon. Blunt instruments and assault (fists, feet, etc) were used in four per cent of the murder-suicides.

Strangulation, poisoning, fire and drowning together accounted for 16 per cent of the homicide incidents classified as murder-suicides (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 shows that in over 80 per cent of the murder-suicides involving firearms, the perpetrator used firearms classified by the new firearm regulations introduced in May 1996 as unrestricted.² These firearms are available to any person meeting the criteria for firearm ownership prescribed by the new legislation. Given the predominantly intimate nature of murder-suicides, it is not surprising that the perpetrators of most of them used firearms which may be readily available at home.

A more detailed analysis of murder-suicides in Australia

With the exception of Stack's (1997) article, previous research

² According to the new firearms legislation, firearms are classified into the following categories:

Category A: air rifles, rimfire rifles (excluding self-loading), single and double barrel shotguns.

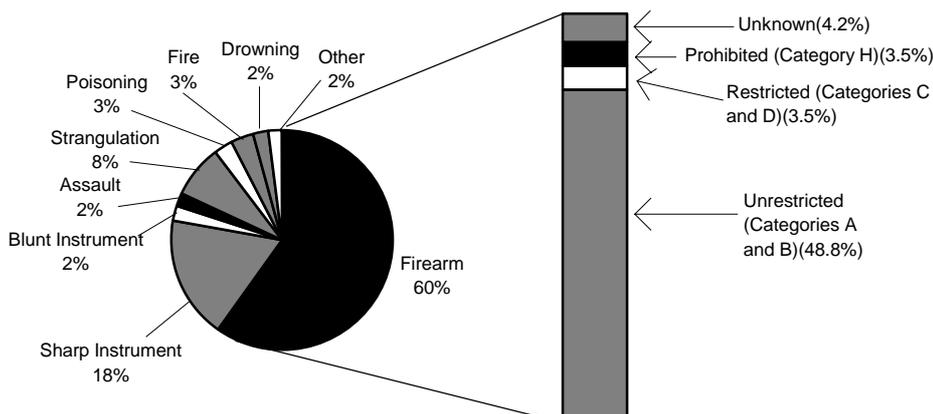
Category B: muzzle-loading firearms, single shot, double barrel and repeating action centre fire rifles, break action shotguns/rifle combinations.

Category C: (prohibited except for occupational purposes): self-loading rimfire rifles with a magazine capacity no greater than 10 rounds, self-loading shotguns with a magazine capacity no greater than 5 rounds, pump action shotguns with a magazine capacity no greater than 5 rounds.

Category D: (prohibited except for official purposes): self-loading centre fire rifles, self-loading shotguns and pump action shotguns with a capacity of more than 5 rounds, self-loading rimfire rifles with a magazine magazine capacity greater than 10 rounds.

Category H: (restricted): all handguns, including air pistols.

Figure 5: AUSTRALIA, Murder-suicides, method used and type of firearm, 1 July 1989-30 June 1996



on murder-suicide has been limited in scope to case studies or simple analysis of crosstabulations. A more rigorous multivariate analysis of the Australian data to determine what additional elements might differentiate murder-suicide from other homicide incidents. This permits a more definitive determination of risk factors than that which can be derived from simple comparisons of incident characteristics.

Figures 3 and 4 suggest that there may be a relationship between the risk of murder-suicide and the relational distance between offenders and victims. Previous research findings in the United States suggest that murder-suicide offenders tend to be older than typical murderers, a pattern which reflects the presumption that older murder-suicide offenders are generally in longer term relationships than other homicide offenders. In addition, most murder-suicides involve a male offender and a female victim, and Caucasians are more likely to be the offenders in murder-suicides (see Stack 1997 and references therein). The data in general reveal patterns similar to those from United States research (see Table 1).

There are however, characteristics which seem to distinguish murder-suicides from other homicides. Table 2 shows that the victims and offenders of murder-suicides are less likely than their counterparts in other homicides:

- to have previous criminal records;
- to be Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples; or
- to have been under the influence of alcohol at the time of the incident; but
- are more likely to be working.

There are some characteristics relating to the incident that may have a distinct impact on the likelihood that the offender will

Table 3: AUSTRALIA, Odds of a homicide being followed by the perpetrator's suicide according to victim-offender relationship, demographic characteristics of victim and offender, and incident characteristics, 1 July 1989 to 30 June 1996

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Odds of perpetrator's suicide</i>
Victim is the offender's child	**9.7
Victim is the offender's spouse	**3.2
Victim is the offender's former spouse	**4.6
Offender is male and victim is female	**3.7
Offender is older than victim	**3.7
Offender and victim are caucasian	**4.8
Offender and victim are under the influence of alcohol at the time of the incident	**0.3
Offender uses a firearm	**5.2
Incident occurs in New South Wales	**1.8

** $p < 0.01$

commit suicide. The data indicate that in New South Wales a greater proportion of homicides are followed by the perpetrator's suicide, while this is less likely to be the case in Queensland and specifically in the Northern Territory, where no murder-suicides were recorded during the seven years considered in this report. For the remaining jurisdictions there are no appreciable differences between the relative frequencies of murder-suicide incidents and other homicide incidents.

Another noteworthy feature associated with murder-suicides is that they seem more likely than other homicide incidents to occur at home and to involve firearms (see Table 2).

The figures in Table 2 highlight the complexity of forces operating on the likelihood of a homicide being followed by the perpetrator's suicide. Bearing in mind that homicide is a rare occurrence in Australia, and murder-suicide even less common, the chance of murder-suicide is affected by a variety of factors which can be linked to each other. One way to gain an insight into the behaviour of such a complex system is through simultaneous analysis of the effect that several factors have on the likelihood of a homicide incident resulting in the

offender's suicide. Logistic regression was used to estimate the probability that a homicide incident would result in murder-suicide and to further assess the marginal effect of each variable in the model on this probability.

Table 3 presents the results of the multivariate logistic regression analysis.³ Controlling for other variables, homicides involving the offender's children raise the odds of suicide 9.7 times. Homicides in which the ex-spouse is the victim raise the odds of suicide 4.6 times. Homicides where the current spouse is the victim increase the odds of suicide 3.2 times.

In addition, the following homicides are associated with higher odds of the perpetrator's suicide:

- homicide incidents where the offender is male and the victim is female;
- homicide incidents where the offender is older than the victim;
- homicide incidents where both offender and victim are of Caucasian appearance;
- incidents where the offender

³ Variables shown in Table 2 which are not included in Table 3 did not have statistically significant effects on the likelihood of a homicide being followed by the perpetrator's suicide.

- uses a firearm; and
- incidents occurring in New South Wales.

Finally, homicides where both the offender and the victim are under the influence of alcohol at the time of the incident decrease the odds of suicide.

Policy Implications

By definition, murder-suicide defies any policy intervention based on the threat of arrest or punishment. The results indicate that most murder-suicides in Australia involve persons in intimate or parent-child relationships. According to Henry and Short (cited in Stack 1997), murder-suicides "can be distinguished from homicides per se to the extent that they involve the loss of nurturance and love". They argue that perpetrators of murder-suicides are trapped in the frustration-nurturance-frustration cycle. "While the source of frustration (the victim) is destroyed in such homicides, the source of nurturance is also destroyed". As the source of nurturance is lost, these homicides can restore or even increase frustration. "The self can become the legitimate target of aggression in the form of suicide" (p. 437).

If the most common form of murder-suicide is that occurring in and around intimate relationships, the appropriate policy interventions will not be unique to murder-suicide, but rather to the circumstances of relationships and their breakdown.

To the extent that a significant proportion of murder-suicides are accomplished with firearms, this would suggest that close attention be given to regimes of licensing and registration to minimise the likelihood of their misuse.

Previous research also

suggests the possibility of contagion when specific incidents of murder-suicide are well publicised (Phillips 1978). Because of the sensational nature of many murder-suicides, there may be great temptation to accord them extensive media coverage. The public interest may require a more subtle treatment of these cases.

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