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# Chapter 1

## Crime Victimization in Australia

According to recorded crime statistics, over one million people in Australia are victimised by crime each year. In 1998, almost one in every 100 persons was a victim of crime against the person, and just over six in every 100 persons were victims of crimes against property. These figures do not include the friends and family of the victim, and the community in general, who also suffer as a result of the crime.

Fear of crime arises not only from actual experience of crime, but also from a range of factors, including media representation. Generally the community becomes affected by, and fearful of, crime through its depiction in the media. Excessive emphasis on crime in media reporting, combined with irresponsible media involvement in sensational or high profile crimes, can contribute to disproportionate fear of crime in the community. Studies have shown that the fear of crime expressed by residents in a community is greater than the level of actual crime suggested by crime statistics for the area (Attorney-General's Department 1995, p. 163).

It is not known exactly how many people in Australia have been victims

of crime. Police statistics are a major source of information on the incidence of crime, but it is well documented that not all crime comes to the attention of the police. Police and recorded crime statistics, therefore, only represent the level of reporting of crime, and will always underestimate the true extent of crime in Australia.

How people experience and react to crime is related to other important aspects of their lives and to prior experiences of crime and the criminal justice system. Reporting behaviour reflects the complexities of these relationships. According to Young, Morris, Cameron and Haslett (1997), perceptions of how serious a criminal act may be; decisions about whether or not it can or should be handled without involving the police; and concerns about how the police are likely to react and what other beneficial or adverse consequences might flow from reporting the offence, are likely to be strongly influenced by at least four interrelated factors:

- the relationship between the victim and offender—crimes amongst those who know and, perhaps, love one another are less likely to be

brought to the attention of the police;

- where the offence occurred;
- the operation of self-interest—insurance requirements, the recovery of property, and the protection of the victim from future offending; and
- the social and demographic characteristics of the victim—income levels, age, ethnicity and family status (Young et al. 1997, pp. 55-9).

Reporting behaviour also appears to be influenced by the type of crime. Violent crimes of an intimate nature—particularly sexual assault, domestic violence and child abuse—are less likely to be reported to the police than property crimes, due to the stigma attached to these intimate crimes, the shame and embarrassment the victims feel, and the perceived inadequacy of the criminal justice system in dealing with these offences.

The level of crime recorded in police statistics depends not only on how often victims report crimes to police, but also on how often police record as crimes the incidents that are reported to them. Sometimes police find insufficient evidence that a crime has occurred, and alleged crimes can go unrecorded because of poor record keeping. Police may also “weed out” crimes that they do not consider serious (Langan & Farrington 1998, p.

11). Fluctuations in recorded crime from month to month and year to year may also be influenced by changing attitudes to reporting crime, or changes in police procedures or crime reporting systems, rather than changes in the incidence of criminal behaviour (ABS 1999, p. 7).

In Australia, there have been efforts to overcome the limitations of police statistics, principally through the Crime and Safety Surveys and the Women’s Safety Survey (ABS 1994; ABS 1996). At present, one of the best ways to determine the level of serious crime in a country is through crime victim surveys. In these surveys of the general public, samples of people are asked whether they have been victimised by a crime in the recent past. Interviewers ask about all crimes, whether reported to the police or not, providing an estimate of how often victims (and others) report crime to police. Crime victim surveys can provide a more accurate estimate of incidence rates, and confirm that many offences are not in fact reported to the police. It is clear from these surveys undertaken in Australia, and other surveys overseas, that victims report only about 40 per cent of crimes to the police (AIC 1998).

In Australia, the Australian Bureau of Statistics conducts Crime and Safety Surveys at irregular intervals. These provide information on both reported and unreported crimes, as well as socioeconomic characteristics of the

victims. Responses obtained in these surveys are based on the respondent's perception of having been a victim of a crime. The most recent survey was conducted in April 1998, but results will not be made available until late 1999. The latest available results, therefore, are from a survey conducted throughout Australia in 1993, in which approximately 52,300 persons aged 15 years and over participated. Although dated, these figures provide an estimate of the level of crime that is not reported to the police.

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## Crime and Safety Survey, Australia 1993

At the time of printing, the release of the 1998 ABS Crime and Safety Survey was imminent. An estimated 286,200 males and 203,000 females were victims of a personal crime during the 12 months ending April 1993. The risk of victimisation for personal crime was highest, at 7.9 per cent, in the 15-24 age group, and tended to decrease with increasing age. The victimisation rate was generally greater for males than for females. In the 15-24 age group, 9.3 per cent of males and 6.5 per cent of females were victims (ABS 1994, p. 4).

In the 12 months prior to the 1993 survey, an estimated 425,000 households (6.8%) were victims of a break and enter or attempted break and enter and 109,600 (or 1.7%)

households were victims of motor vehicle theft in Australia.

Generally, the results of crime victim surveys indicate that victims are more willing to report property crimes to police than personal crimes. In the 1993 Crime and Safety Survey, the proportion of victims reporting the last incident to the police ranged from 93.7 per cent for motor vehicle theft to 25 per cent for sexual assault (ABS 1994). Results from the Women's Safety Survey conducted in 1996 indicate that a much lower proportion (only 10-15%) of sexual assaults of women are in fact reported to police (ABS 1996).

With the exception of sexual assault, the main reasons for not telling police about the last incident were, typically, that they felt it was "too trivial/unimportant", or that the "police *could* not do anything", or the "police *would* not do anything" about it. In the case of sexual assault, the two most frequently given reasons were that it was a "private matter", or they were "afraid of reprisal/vengeance" (ABS 1994, p. 9).

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## Recorded Crime

The main source of information on the level of crime in Australia comes from the Australian Bureau of Statistics publication *Recorded Crime Australia*, which provides national figures on crimes recorded by police in each jurisdiction.

Since 1993, the Australian Bureau of Statistics has produced a series of publications providing nationally comparable statistics on selected crimes recorded by State and Territory police services in Australia. The compilation of these statistics uses national standards and classifications, however it must be recognised that reporting rates, legal systems and reporting procedures differ between each State and Territory.

This report will discuss two major categories of recorded crimes:

- “crimes against the person”—such as homicide and related offences including murder, manslaughter, attempted murder and driving causing death; assault; sexual assault; armed and unarmed robbery; kidnapping/abduction; and

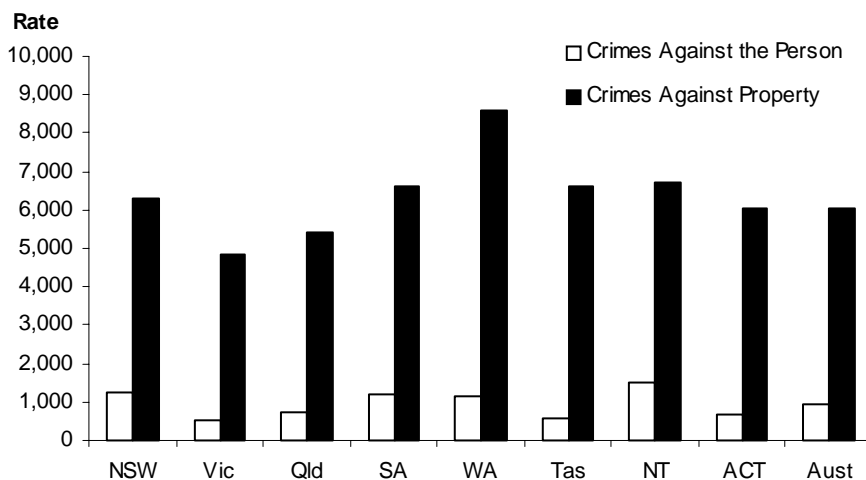
blackmail/extortion; and

- “crimes against property”—including unlawful entry with intent; motor vehicle theft; and other theft.

### Reported Victims of Crime

There were over 1.3 million reported victims of crime in Australia in 1998. There were 173,250 reported victims of crimes against the person—a rate of 924 victims per 100,000 population. The highest rate of victimisation by crimes against the person was in the Northern Territory (1498 victims per 100,000 population) and the lowest was in Victoria (512 victims per 100,000 population). There were 1,132,456 victims of crimes against property—a rate of 6039 per 100,000 population. The rate of crimes against property ranged from a low of 4843 per

**Figure 1: Victims of Crimes Recorded by Police, Australia 1998, Rate per 100,000 Population**



Source: Adapted from ABS *Recorded Crime Australia 1998*

100,000 population in Victoria to a high of 8611 per 100,000 population in Western Australia (see Figure 1).

Table 1 presents the number and rate per 100,000 population of selected crimes recorded by police in Australia in 1998. Approximately 87 per cent of crimes recorded by police in this period were crimes against property, the largest category of crime being “other theft”, accounting for about 43 per cent of offences recorded by police. “Other theft” includes all recorded theft offences except unlawful entry with intent and theft of motor vehicles. Thirteen per cent of crimes recorded were crimes against the person, the largest category being assault, accounting for 10 per cent of all

selected offences recorded by police in 1998. Fortunately, among the least common crimes recorded by police in Australia are homicide and the related offences of attempted murder and driving causing death.

### Victims’ Demographics

In Australia in 1998, males aged between 15 and 19 had the highest victimisation rate for offences against the person. Generally, males are more commonly victimised by crime than females, with the exception of the offences of sexual assault and abduction/ kidnapping.

Figure 2 presents victimisation rates for offences against the person by age and gender for Australia in 1998.

**Table 1: Crimes Recorded by Police, Australia 1998, Number and Rate per 100,000 Population**

	Number	Rate per 100,000 Population
<b>Crimes Against the Person</b>		
Homicide*	333	1.8
Attempted Murder	382	2.0
Driving Causing Death	262	1.4
Assault	132,967	709.2
Sexual Assault	14,568	77.7
Kidnapping/Abduction	662	3.5
Robbery	2,3778	126.8
Blackmail/Extortion	298	1.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>173,250</b>	<b>924.0</b>
<b>Crimes Against Property</b>		
Unlawful Entry With Intent	435,670	2323.9
Motor Vehicle Theft	131,572	701.8
Other Theft	565,214	3014.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,132,456</b>	<b>6039.4</b>
<b>Total Selected Crimes</b>	<b>1,305,706</b>	<b>6963.4</b>

\*Includes murder and manslaughter

Source: Adapted from ABS *Recorded Crime Australia 1998*

Victimisation rates for offences against the person were generally highest for the 15–19 age group. Males in this age group had a victimisation rate of almost 2100 per 100,000, while females in this age group had a victimisation rate of about 1800 per 100,000. The 15–19 age group had the highest victimisation rates for driving causing death, sexual assault, kidnapping/abduction and robbery. Assault and blackmail/extortion victimisation rates were highest for the 20–24 age group, while both homicide and attempted murder were highest for the 25–34 age group.

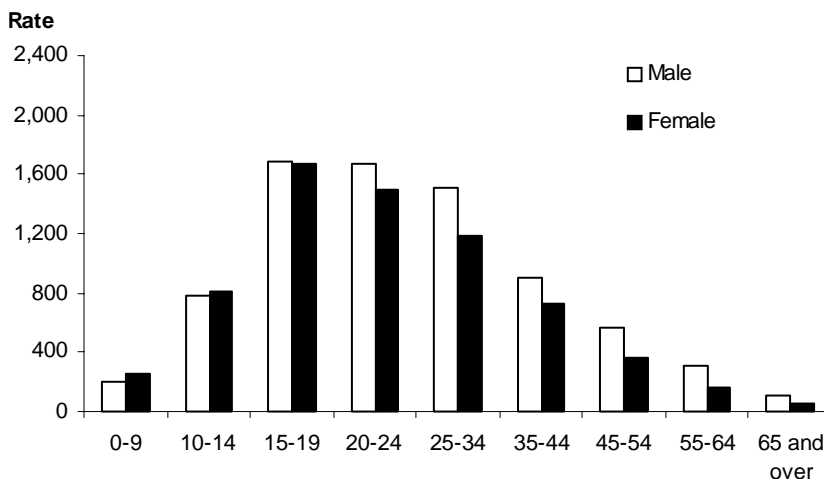
### Relationship Between the Victim and Offender

Information on the relationship between the victim and offender was

only available for those offences defined as “crimes against the person”, excluding robbery, (i.e. homicide, attempted murder, driving causing death, assault, sexual assault, kidnapping/abduction and blackmail/extortion). Overall, for these offences, where the victim-offender relationship was known, the offender was most often known to the victim. The victim-offender relationship did, however, differ depending on the type of crime and on the gender of the victim (ABS 1999).

In the majority of homicides and attempted murders, the offender was recorded as known to the victim (64% and 61% respectively). In about 31 per cent of homicides and 23 per cent of attempted murders the offender was a family member. In both homicides and

**Figure 2: Victims of Offences Against the Person by Age and Gender, Australia 1998, Rate per 100,000 Population**



Source: Adapted from ABS *Recorded Crime Australia 1998*

attempted murders, female victims were more likely to know the offender than male victims—females knew the offender in 72 per cent of homicides and 74 per cent of attempted murders, whereas males knew the offender in only 59 per cent of homicides and 55 per cent of attempted murders. Females were also more likely to be victims of homicide and attempted murder in which the offender was a family member (50% and 38%, respectively), whereas males were more likely to be a victim of a non-family member (39% and 40%, respectively). Homicides and attempted murders by strangers were more likely for males than for females (ABS 1999, pp. 23, 28, 33).

In driving causing death offences, the relationship between victim and offender was similar for both males and females, with the offender most likely to be unknown to the victim (64%). About 28 per cent of males and 29 per cent of females knew the offender, and a greater proportion of females (13%), compared to males (6%), were victims where the offender was a family member (ABS 1999, p. 38). Where the victim-offender relationship was known in assault cases, females were more likely to be assaulted by someone known to them, whereas males were more likely to be assaulted by someone unknown to them (ABS 1999, p. 43).

In about one-third of sexual assault incidents, the relationship between the

victim and offender was not stated or was inadequately described.

Interestingly, the victim-offender relationship was similar for both male and female victims of sexual assault. Over half the victims, males and females, were sexually assaulted by offenders known to them. Where known, the offender was most likely to be a non-family member. However, an offender was more likely to be a member of the victim's own family (22%) than a stranger (14%). Males were in fact the least likely to be sexually assaulted by a stranger (10%) (ABS 1999, p. 51).

In the offence of kidnapping/abduction, victims were more likely to be kidnapped or abducted by a stranger (51%) than someone known to them (28%). Where the offender was known to the victim, it was most likely to be a non-family member (22%). In about 6 per cent of cases the offender was a family member. Male victims of kidnapping/abduction were more likely to know their offender (32%) than female victims (26%) (ABS 1999, p. 58).

The 1993 Crime and Safety Survey also revealed that victims of sexual assault and assault most commonly knew the offender, while robbery victims were less likely to know the offender (ABS 1994, p. 13).

Contrary to popular perceptions, violence is very much a family matter and concerns about unexpected and

random attacks are usually misplaced (Goldney 1998, p. 154). However, most people are still more fearful of strangers than people they know, or are in a relationship with. A study commissioned by the National Campaign Against Violence and Crime (NCAVAC 1998) examined fear of crime among people in cities and in rural areas, using a combination of focus groups and interviews. The study revealed that a primary focus of people’s fear is the “unpredictable stranger” in the uncontrollable environment. A principal factor underlying this fear is uncertainty about how a stranger may behave.

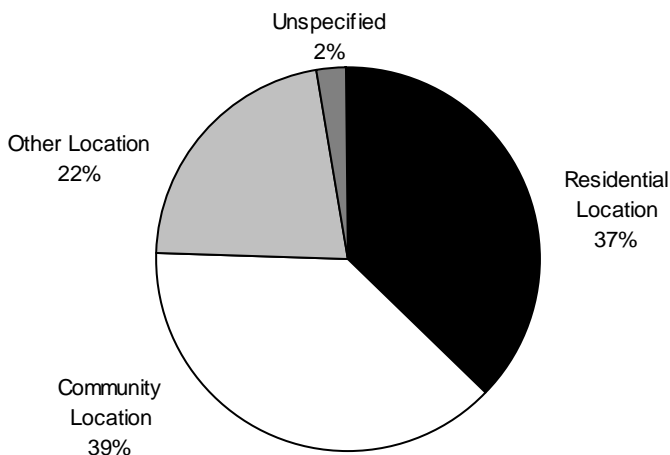
### Location of Occurrence of Crime

“Location” refers to the initial site where the crime occurred, classified on the basis of the location’s function:

- *residential locations*—dwellings used for private or commercial residential purposes, for example houses/units/apartments, garages/ carports, motels and hostels;
- *community locations*—any location whose primary function is the provision of services for public use, for example public transport, car parks and streets/footpaths;
- *other locations*—refers to retail or commercial premises, recreational facilities, government offices, and warehousing/storage.

In Australia in 1998, almost 40 per cent of offences recorded by police occurred in a residential location. The crimes most likely to be committed in residential locations were homicide, attempted murder, assault, sexual assault and unlawful entry with intent.

**Figure 3: Crimes Against the Person by Location of Occurrence, Australia 1998**



Source: Adapted from ABS Recorded Crime Australia 1998

Crimes occurring in community locations accounted for 30 per cent of crimes recorded by police, with kidnapping/abduction, robbery, motor vehicle theft and other theft featuring most prominently in these locations.

Figure 3 shows the relative proportions of crimes against the person according to the locations in which they occurred.

Crimes against the person most commonly occurred in community (39%) and residential (37%) locations. Violent offences such as homicide and attempted murder, assault and sexual assault most commonly occurred in residential locations, particularly in private dwellings. In 1998 a total of 203 (or 61%) homicides and 207 (54%) attempted murders took place in residential locations. Over 50,000 assaults (40%) and 9615 sexual assaults (66%) occurred in homes and other residential locations.

Assaults were also common in community locations, with about 38 per cent of assaults taking place in these locations. Unfortunately, the age and gender of victims involved in crimes in specific locations is not available. We can only speculate as to the type of assault by examining the victim-offender relationship and the location in which the assault occurred. In the jurisdictions in which the relationship between the victim and offender was known, females were more likely to have been assaulted by someone known to them (such as a family

member), whereas males were more likely to have been assaulted by a stranger (ABS 1999, p. 43). Assaults in residential locations may include domestic assaults with partners or ex-partners, arguments between relatives and friends and arguments between neighbours, whereas assaults in community locations may involve heavy drinking followed by arguments. According to Jochelson (1997), a large proportion of "on the street" assaults take place in close proximity to licensed premises, such as hotels, pubs, nightclubs, adult nightspots and licensed restaurants.

The 1993 Crime and Safety Survey revealed that female victims of assault were most commonly assaulted in their own home, while male victims were most commonly assaulted in some other location, or at their place of work or study (ABS 1994, p. 14). Among female victims of assault who reported the last incident as occurring inside the home, over 90 per cent of them reported that the offender was known to them, and 38 per cent of them were victims of assault on three or more occasions in the 12 months prior to the survey (ABS 1994, p. 11).

Robberies and kidnapping/abductions are most common in community locations. In 1998 a total of 11,801 robberies (50%) took place in community locations. However, robberies occurring in community locations were more likely to be unarmed than armed. Armed robberies

most commonly occurred in other locations, such as retail premises. In 1998 a total of 435 kidnapping/abductions (66%) occurred in community locations, particularly from streets and footpaths (49%).

Figure 4 shows the relative proportions of crimes against property according to the locations in which they occurred.

The highest proportion of offences against property occurred in residential locations. Of the over one million (1,132,456) offences against property recorded by police in Australia in 1998, almost 450,000 (40%) occurred in homes and commercial residences.

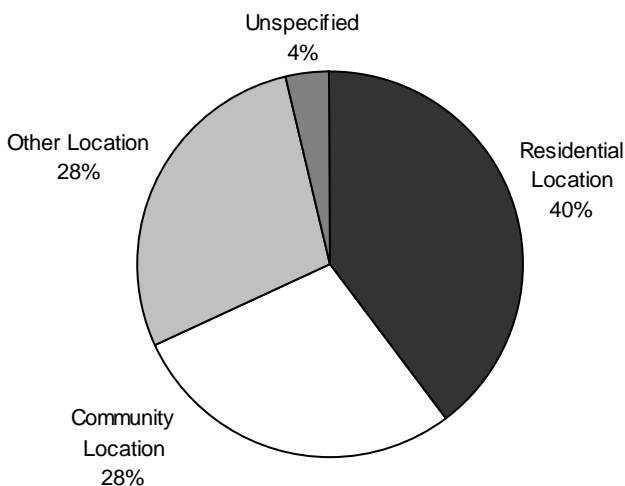
A little over two-thirds of all completed and attempted burglaries each year occur in residential locations. More than 20 per cent of the over half a million thefts each year involve stealing

from homes, and nearly 20 per cent of motor vehicles stolen each year are removed from garages and parking lots attached to homes.

In Australia in 1998, 28 per cent of offences against property took place in community locations and a further 28 per cent occurred in other locations, such as retail premises. The offences against property most commonly occurring in community locations were motor vehicle theft (62%) and other theft (37%), while other theft was also common in other locations (36%), particularly retail premises (24%). A little over 40 per cent of robberies occurred in other locations, such as retail premises (30%). Almost 75 per cent of robberies of retail premises were armed robberies.

While these statistics reveal that homes are primary targets for many

**Figure 4: Crimes Against Property by Location of Occurrence, Australia 1998**



Source: Adapted from ABS *Recorded Crime Australia 1998*

predatory crimes, crime control policies in Australia appear to be concerned with preventing street crimes. An important objective of police services is to “reassure the public”, so that the community feels safe both in public and in their homes (SCRCSSP 1999, p. 386), and fear of crime is generally a concern for what may happen to us in the street, not in our homes. Most people feel their homes are places of refuge and safety, and are more fearful of crime occurring in the community. Many factors affect this perception, including media reporting, but it is interesting to compare perceptions of crime problems with reported crime statistics, recognising that reported crime understates the actual level of crime (SCRCSSP 1999, p. 386).

A quarterly household survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the *Population Survey Monitor*, has found that, generally, people tend to feel safer in their own homes than out in the community. Nationally, 93 per cent of persons feel “safe” or “very safe” at home alone during the day, and 80 per cent of persons feel “safe” or “very safe” at home alone after dark (SCRCSSP 1999, p. 386).

A lower proportion of people feel safe out in the community, especially after dark. Nationally, 88 per cent of persons aged 18 years and over feel “safe” or “very safe” when walking or jogging locally during the day, and 68 per cent

of persons feel “safe” or “very safe” when travelling on public transport during the day. When walking or jogging after dark, however, only 38 per cent of persons feel “safe” or “very safe”, and only 21 per cent of persons feel “safe” or “very safe” when travelling on public transport after dark (SCRCSSP 1999, pp. 387, 437-8).

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## Conclusion

It is difficult to gauge the true level of crime in Australia. Crime victims surveys reveal that a large proportion of crimes are not reported to police and therefore are not counted in recorded crime statistics—the source of much of our knowledge on crime. Recorded crime statistics are, however, able to provide us with some measure of the characteristics of victims and the issues surrounding the crime incident, such as the relationship between the victim and offender and where the crime occurred. These statistics indicate that many of the victims of crime are young males or young females. Also, contrary to popular belief, much of the crime occurring in society is in private residences, often perpetrated by offenders known to the victim. These statistics do not concur with results of surveys on fear of crime, which indicate that many people are most afraid of “unpredictable strangers” in the community.