



No. 51 Homicides in Australia 1992-93

Marianne James and Jennifer Hallinan

Since the beginning of recorded history people have killed one another, and it seems, will continue to do so. Good policy research can provide data and documentation in the hope of explaining phenomena such as homicide. While the thought of elimination of homicide is unrealistic, reductions in homicide are feasible. Armed with data which describes the various characteristics of homicide incidents, and of victims and offenders, aspects of this violent crime can be identified as early warning indicators. Criminal justice and welfare agencies can develop preventive strategies which target those characteristics which surface again and again—socioeconomic factors; a history of violence; alcohol abuse; availability of lethal weapons; family violence; child abuse; racial harassment; homophobia.

Homicide is a rare event in Australia. But by continuing to collect and analyse homicide data, policy options can be devised which provide the basis for preventive measures in some circumstances, thereby minimising the incidence of this violent crime. This Trends and Issues paper is part of that work. A forthcoming paper will look at trends over the period 1989-93.

Adam Graycar
Director

There were 326 homicide incidents in Australia from 1 July 1992 to 30 June 1993. These incidents involved 355 victims and 352 accused.

Information about these incidents, victims and accused enable us to analyse the nature of homicide in Australia and to detect trends in its character over time. This report is the fourth in the series of the National Homicide Monitoring Program.

Relationships

The relationship between the victim and the accused (*see* Figure 1) has a great deal to do with the particular kinds of interactions which lead to violent crime. In Australia, just under one-third of all homicides for the year 1992-93 took place within the family. Almost two-thirds of these were between spouses, both current and separated, including *de facto* and sexual intimates, such as girlfriend and boyfriend and same-sex relationships, with 9 out of 10 of these being committed by a male. Non-intimate family relationships such as parents, brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents were evident in nearly 17 per cent of family homicides, while relationships between a parent (custodial, non-custodial or *de facto*) and a child account for almost 20 per cent of family homicides. Friends/acquaintances were responsible for a further one-third of homicides. Strangers were responsible for nearly 17 per cent of the total, with over half of these occurring during the commission of other crimes such as robbery and sexual assault.

**AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE
OF CRIMINOLOGY**

trends

&

issues

in crime and criminal justice

December 1995

ISSN 0817-8542

ISBN 0 642 24007 8



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Defining Homicide

For the purposes of the Homicide Monitoring Program, the definition of homicide is the operational definition used by police throughout Australia. As such, the following kinds of incidents are included:

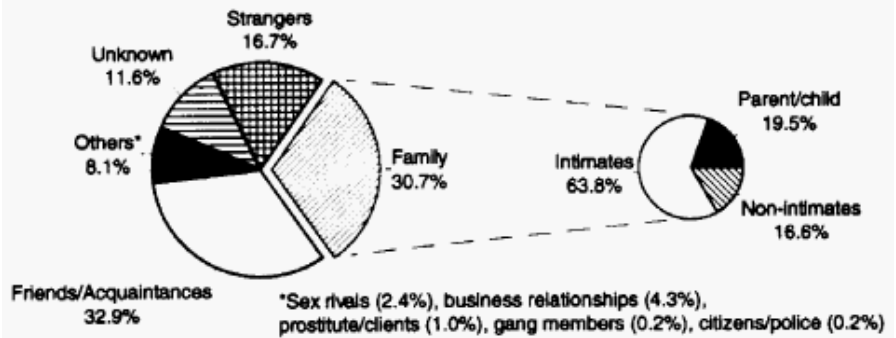
- all cases resulting in a person or persons being charged with murder or manslaughter (including the charge of "dangerous act causing death" which applies in the Northern Territory). This excludes driving-related offences except where these immediately follow a criminal event such as an armed robbery;
- all murder-suicides classed as murder by the police;
- all other deaths classed by the police as homicides, even though no suspect has been apprehended.

Attempted murder is excluded, as are violent deaths such as industrial accidents involving criminal negligence (unless a charge of manslaughter is laid). Lawful homicide, including incidents involving police in the course of their duties, is also excluded.

To obtain a more accurate picture of homicide, the relationship between the victim and the accused must be analysed in conjunction with weapon use, time and place of incident and the precipitating factors. The importance of information on precipitating factors (see Figure 2) is particularly relevant, as this provides the basis for the identification of different types of homicides from which corresponding risk factors can be determined and preventive measures implemented.

Where homicides between sexual intimates have been recorded (25.6 per cent of cases), half of these specifically mention sexual jealousy or the breakdown of a relationship, and the remaining half relate to what is termed "general spousal disputes". It is possible that a proportion of these

Figure 1. Homicide: Relationship between Victims and Accused, Australia 1992-93 (percentage of relationships¹, N=414)



1. Many incidents involved more than one victim or more than one accused, resulting in 414 victim/accused relationships

more general disputes also included sexual jealousy or the breakdown of the relationship.

The Incident

Of the 326 homicide incidents in Australia from 1 July 1992 to 30 June 1993, 70 per cent of these involved one victim and one accused. At the other end of the continuum, one incident involved a single victim and seven suspects, while in another, one suspect killed six victims. The rate of victimisation across Australia as outlined in Table 1 was 2.0 per 100 000 of the population. The rate of offending is outlined in Table 2.

Geographic area

The incidence of homicide closely mirrored the population distribution in Australia with 58 per cent occurring in urban areas such as Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane, Perth, Hobart, Canberra, Darwin and the major metropolitan centres of

Newcastle, Wollongong and Geelong (5 per cent in inner city areas and 53 per cent in the suburbs). Regional centres such as Townsville or Ballarat accounted for 17 per cent of all homicides, while 12 per cent were committed in country towns. In other rural areas the proportion was 8 per cent and in Aboriginal communities it was 5 per cent.

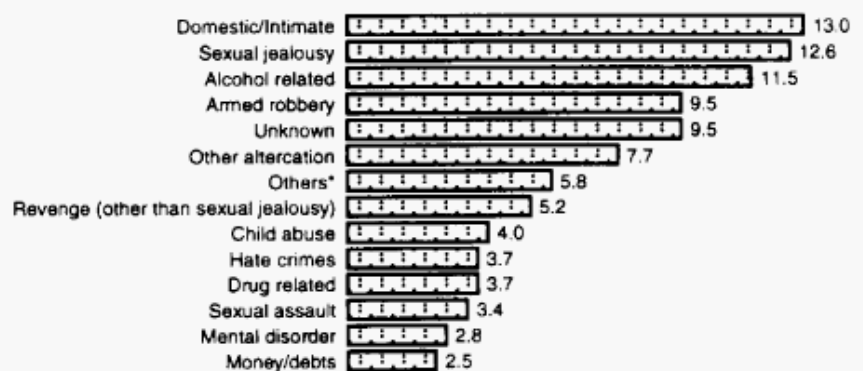
Time of day/day of week

There was a fairly even spread over all the days of the week, with slightly more homicides occurring on Saturday night and the majority of Sunday's happening in the early hours of the morning. The time of the incident was recorded for 89 per cent of cases, where two-thirds were committed between the evening and the early morning hours.

Location

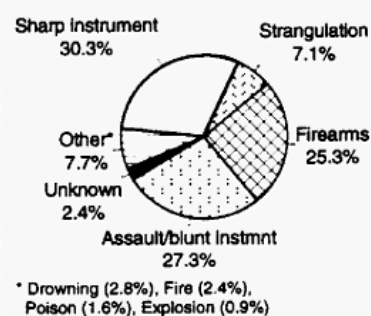
Seventy-four per cent of all homicides occurred within residential premises. Of these, four out of five took place in

Figure 2. Primary Precipitating Factors in Homicide, Australia 1992-93 (percentage of incidents, N=326)



* Contract killing (1.0%), suicide pact (0.6%), other factors not involving an altercation (4.2%)

Figure 3. Homicide: Primary Method/Weapon, Australia 1992-93
(percentage of incidents, N=326)



Time of day/day of week

the victim's home, where women (who were usually co-habiting with the suspect) were 1.5 times more likely than men to be killed. However, male victims were almost twice as likely to be killed in the home of the suspect. This increased level of risk for males extended to pubs, clubs and discos and their environs where male victimisation was more than five times the rate of female victimisation. In open areas such as the bush, beach, car park, public park and street, men were only slightly more at risk than women.

Weapon/Method

Figure 3 shows the primary weapon/method used in homicide incidents for the year 1992-93. In 30

The National Homicide Monitoring Program

The Homicide Monitoring Program has been operating within the Australian Institute of Criminology since 1989. Establishment of the Program was recommended by the National Committee on Violence and it works with the cooperation of all Australian Police Services. Up until 1989 it was not possible to give an accurate picture of homicide patterns in Australia.

The purpose of the Program is to identify as precisely as possible the characteristics of individuals which place them at risk of homicide victimisation and of offending, and the circumstances which contribute to the likelihood of a homicide occurring. This, in turn, provides a basis for the rational implementation of public policy on the prevention and control of violence. The basic data source for the Homicide Monitoring Program is police records, supplemented by information from individual investigating officers.

per cent of cases, a sharp instrument (primarily a knife) was used. Nearly half of these involved disputes between sexual intimates. The over-consumption of alcohol was a contributing factor in 14 per cent of homicides involving a sharp instrument. In half of the incidents where the suspect was female, a sharp instrument was the weapon used.

Twenty-five per cent of all homicides were committed with a firearm. Of these, two in five resulted from disputes between sexual intimates, while a further one in five resulted from some type of altercation between friends/acquaintances. The rest included other crimes such as robbery, or involved non-intimate family members. Alcohol was present in only a very small percentage of these

altercations. The weapons used were: a .22 rifle in 40 per cent of cases, a shotgun in 30 per cent of cases, a handgun in 13 per cent of cases, an automatic or semi-automatic weapon in 7 per cent of cases and a .303 rifle in 4 per cent of cases. The remainder were unrecorded. In 85 per cent of firearm incidents, the suspects were male.

Assaults with fists, feet or blunt instrument, accounted for 27 per cent of homicides during the period from June 1992 to July 1993. Almost 2 out of 5 of these assaults were associated with altercations between nonintimates such as friends or acquaintances, and a quarter of these incidents involved alcohol. One in five assaults occurred between sexual intimates, while half of child abuse

Table 1. Homicide, Sex of Victim by Jurisdiction, Number and Rates per 100 000 Population, Australia 1992-93

| Sex of Victim | Jurisdiction of Incident | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------|-------|
| | NSW No. Rate | Vic. No. Rate | Qld No. Rate | WA No. Rate | SA No. Rate | Tas. No. Rate | NT No. Rate | ACT No. Rate | Aust. No. Rate | % |
| Male | 75(2.5) | 41 (1.9) | 43 (2.8) | 23 (2.7) | 17 (2.3) | 2 (0.9) | 12 (13.7) | 1 (0.7) | 214(2.4) | 60.3% |
| Female | 47(1.6) | 20 (0.9) | 34 (2.2) | 17 (2.0) | 12 (1.6) | 5 (2.1) | 5 (6.1) | 1 (0.7) | 141(1.6) | 39.7% |
| Total Victims | 122(2.0) 34.4% | 61 (1.4) 17.2% | 77 (2.5) 21.7% | 40 (2.4) 11.3% | 29 (2.0) 8.2% | 7 (1.5) 2.0% | 17 (10.0) 4.8% | 2 (0.7) 0.6% | 355(2.0) 100% | 100% |

Table 2. Homicide, Sex of Accused by Jurisdiction, Number and Rates per 100 000 Population, Australia 1992-93

| Sex of Accused | Jurisdiction of Incident | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------|-------|
| | NSW | Vic. | Qld | WA | SA | Tas. | NT | ACT | Aust.* | % |
| | No. Rate | No. Rate | No. Rate | No. Rate | No. Rate | No. Rate | No. Rate | No. Rate | No. Rate | |
| Male | 103 (3.5) | 57 (2.6) | 75 (4.8) | 34 (4.0) | 27 (3.7) | 6 (2.6) | 14 (15.9) | 2 (1.3) | 318 (3.6) | 90.3% |
| Female | 9 (0.3) | 6 (0.2) | 9 (0.6) | 1 (0.1) | 3 (0.4) | 1 (0.4) | 4 (4.9) | 1 (0.7) | 34 (0.4) | 9.7% |
| Total Accused | 112 (1.9) 31.8% | 63 (1.4) 17.9% | 84 (2.7) 23.9% | 35 (2.1) 9.9% | 30 (2.1) 8.5% | 7 (1.5) 2.0% | 18 (10.6) 5.1% | 3 (1.0) 0.9% | 352 (2.0) 100% | 100% |

* There were 31 incidents in which no offender was identified.

Table 3. Homicide: Jurisdiction of Incident by Primary Weapon/Method, Australia 1992-93

| Primary Weapon/Method | Jurisdiction of Incident | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|-------|-----|
| | NSW & ACT | | Vic. | | Qld | | WA | | SA | | Tas. | | NT | | Aust. | |
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Firearm | 34 | 31 | 15 | 26 | 17 | 24 | 5 | 14 | 8 | 28 | 2 | 33 | 1 | 6 | 82 | 25 |
| Sharp Instrument | 27 | 25 | 15 | 26 | 20 | 28 | 16 | 46 | 9 | 31 | 0 | 0 | 12 | 71 | 99 | 30 |
| Assault/Blunt Instrument | 25 | 23 | 19 | 33 | 23 | 32 | 9 | 26 | 7 | 24 | 3 | 50 | 3 | 18 | 89 | 27 |
| Strangulation | 10 | 9 | 4 | 7 | 4 | 6 | 3 | 9 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 17 | 0 | 0 | 23 | 7 |
| Other | 13 | 12 | 4 | 7 | 4 | 6 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 6 | 25 | 8 |
| Unknown | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 8 | 2 |
| Total Incidents | 110 | 100 | 58 | 100 | 71 | 100 | 35 | 100 | 29 | 100 | 6 | 100 | 17 | 100 | 326 | 100 |

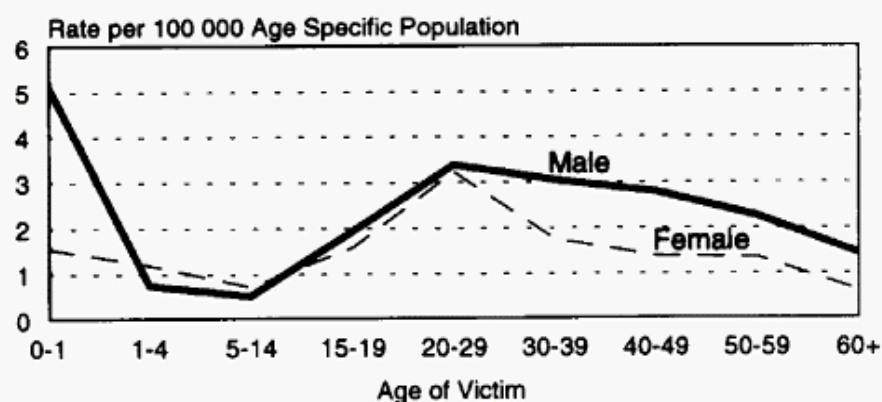
homicides were the result of physical assault. Similarly, assault was the cause of half of all hate-crime killings. Incidents involving assault were committed almost exclusively by males. Table 3 shows the jurisdictional pattern of weapon use.

The Victim

Of the 355 victims in 1992-93, there were 141 females and 214 males (a ratio of approximately 2:3). With the exception of males under the age of one, the highest homicide rate for both males and females was in the 20-29 year-old age group (see Figure 4, Table 4). In fact, in this particular age group both males and females were victimised in almost equal numbers. This is also the case in the 5-14 and 15-19 year age groups. In the older age groups, the numbers reduce proportionately in all categories to a ratio of approximately two males to one female. In the less than one year age group, the ratio was nearly 1 female for every 4 males.

Australia-wide, the Australian

Figure 4. Homicide: Age of Victim by Sex, Australia 1992-93



Capital Territory had the lowest rate of victimisation per 100 000 population and the Northern Territory the highest (see Figure 5). Records do not show accurately the race of victims but rather point to racial appearance. This is frequently no more than a subjective assessment by police, and errors and inconsistencies in this sensitive area do occur. However, it would appear that Aboriginal people are vastly over-represented in the number of homicide victims. Although Aboriginal people number only 1.5 per cent of the population they represent approximately 11 per cent of victims.

Non-English speaking background people who represent 13 per cent of the total population accounted for 7.9 per cent of victims.

Marital status was recorded for 90 per cent of all victims. Of these, half were single and a quarter were married. Fifteen per cent were in de facto relationships and 10 per cent were separated or divorced.

Employment status, where applicable, was recorded for 85 per cent of all victims. Of these, 68 per cent were unemployed and 32 per cent were employed. **Alcohol** influence, where recorded (85 per cent of all cases) was evident in 25 per cent of

Table 4. Homicide: Age of Victim by Sex, Number and Rate per 100 000 Age Specific Population, Australia 1992-93

| Sex of Victim | Age of Victim | | | | | | | | | | | Total |
|---------------|---------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|--------|------|-------|
| | <1 | 1-4 | 5-14 | 15-19 | 20-29 | 30-39 | 40-49 | 50-59 | 60+ | Unknwn | | |
| Male | 7 (5.2) | 4 (0.8) | 7 (0.5) | 13 (2.0) | 48 (3.4) | 43 (3.1) | 35 (2.8) | 19 (2.3) | 18 (1.4) | 20 | 214 | |
| Female | 2 (1.6) | 6 (1.2) | 9 (0.7) | 10 (1.6) | 45 (3.2) | 25 (1.8) | 17 (1.4) | 11 (1.4) | 10 (0.7) | 6 | 141 | |
| Total Victims | 9 (3.4) | 10 (1.0) | 16 (0.6) | 23 (1.8) | 93 (3.3) | 68 (2.4) | 52 (2.1) | 30 (1.8) | 28 (1.1) | 26 | 355 | |
| | 2.5% | 2.8% | 4.5% | 6.5% | 26.2% | 19.2% | 14.7% | 8.5% | 7.9% | 7.3% | 100% | |

Table 5. Homicide: Age of Accused by Sex, Number and Rate per 100 000 Age Specific Population, Australia 1992-93

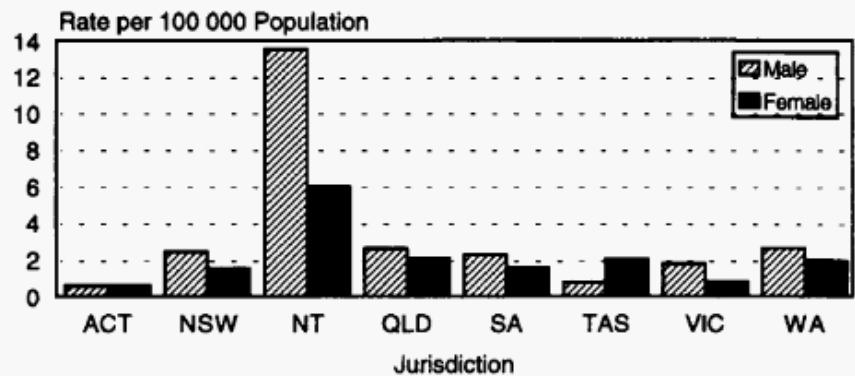
| Sex of Accused | Age of Accused | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------|----------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|------|--------|-----|-------|------|---|--|
| | 5-14 | | 15-19 | | 20-29 | | 30-39 | | 40-49 | | 50-59 | | 60+ | | Unknwn | | Total | | % | |
| Male | 3 | (0.2) | 39 | (5.9) | 146 | (10.3) | 63 | (4.5) | 45 | (3.6) | 11 | (1.3) | 8 | (.7) | 3 | | 318 | 90.3 | | |
| Female | 0 | | 6 | (1.0) | 15 | (1.1) | 9 | (0.4) | 1 | (0.1) | 3 | (0.4) | 0 | | 0 | | 34 | 9.7 | | |
| Total Accused | 3 | (0.1) | 45 | (3.5) | 161 | (5.7) | 72 | (2.5) | 46 | (1.9) | 14 | (0.8) | 8 | (.3) | 3 | | 352 | | | |
| | | .9% | | 12.8% | | 45.7% | | 20.5% | | 13.1% | | 4.0% | | 2.3% | | .9% | | 100% | | |

cases, with male victims three times more likely to be alcohol affected. Nearly half of these were in the 15-29 year-old age groups. **Drug** use (cannabis, amphetamines, cocaine, heroin, methadone, prescription drugs) was evident in 4 per cent of cases and occurred almost exclusively in the 20-29 year-old and the 30-39 year-old age groups in equal numbers. Where recorded, 10 per cent of the victims had a previous **criminal history**.

The Accused

There were 352 accused persons identified by police in relation to the 326 incidents which occurred in 1992-93. These data relate to suspects, charged persons and convicted persons. There were 31 incidents for which no suspect had been identified by police at the time of data collection. Male accused (318) outnumbered female accused (34) by a ratio of more than 9:1. This fluctuated over the age set with the male rate in the 20-29 year category being by far the highest of all the groups (*see* Figure 5, Table 5). There were no female accused in the over-60 age group. As stated for the victim data, Aboriginal people would appear

Figure 5. Homicide: Jurisdiction and Sex of Victims, Australia 1992-93



to be vastly over-represented in the number of homicide suspects (nearly 13 per cent). Six per cent of suspects came from non-English speaking backgrounds.

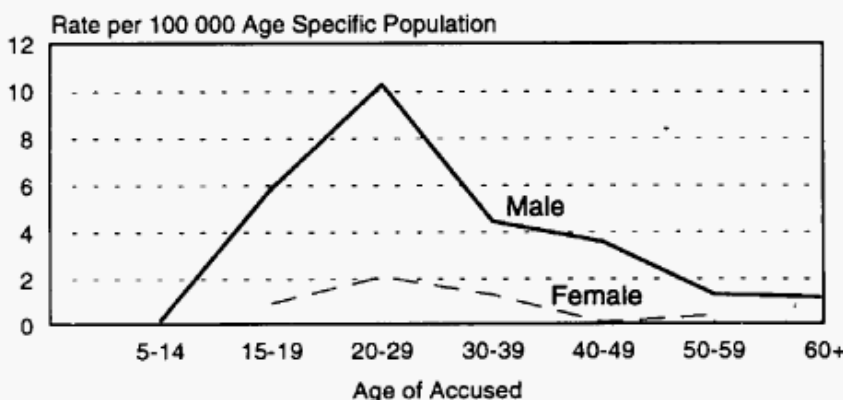
Marital status was recorded for nearly 90 per cent of all the accused. Of these, 54 per cent were single, 15 per cent were married, 18 per cent were in de facto relationships and 11 per cent were separated (male and female). **Employment status** was recorded for 84 per cent of all the accused. Of these, 58 per cent were unemployed and 42 per cent were employed. **Alcohol** influence, where recorded (75 per cent of all cases), was evident in nearly one-third of these incidents with the male to female rate at 10:1. More than half of these were in the 15-29 year age

groups. **Drug** use (cannabis, amphetamines, cocaine, heroin, methadone, prescription drugs) was evident in only 10 per cent of cases and occurred predominantly in the 20-29 year old age group with a male to female ratio of 3:1. Where recorded, 37 per cent of the accused had a previous **criminal history**. Two per cent of the female accused and 60 per cent of the males had previous records. A total of 29 accused committed **suicide** after the incident. Twelve of these involved a husband/wife or de facto relationship, three involved separated husband/wife or de facto relationships and six involved other family relationships.

Discussion

Homicide is not one type of crime. Very few homicides are premeditated. Rather, each homicide is the product of situational factors. Where the victim and accused are known to each other, these factors are triggered by an historical social relationship. Where they are not known to each other, the situational factors themselves are the trigger. Different categories are therefore determined by the motives of the accused, the circumstances of the event, and the interaction be-

Figure 6. Homicide: Age of Accused by Sex, Australia 1992-93



tween the victim and the accused. Nevertheless, homicide is not a random event. It is the extreme form of violent crime and, as such, steps can be taken to ensure the implementation of some preventive strategies.

For instance, when considering family violence, there are a number of distinguishing features. Victims and offenders in these cases are both part of an ongoing, dynamic relationship. This close interaction increases the opportunities for violence. It is possible therefore that the victim has been assaulted repeatedly by the offender, or in some cases that the offender has been assaulted repeatedly by the victim. Homicides in which a history of family violence is evident can be analysed on three levels: sexual intimates; non-intimate family members such as siblings, parents and grandparents; and child abuse. Homicides between friends and acquaintances can also arise from situational factors such as the overuse of alcohol and drugs which leads to a social altercation with unintended consequences.

Stranger homicides are more difficult to monitor. Both robbery and sexual assaults can often be the result of a crime that "went wrong". With serial killers and mass murderers, the accompanying psychoses of the offender are difficult, if not impossible, to predict or deter. These, fortunately, account for a only a minuscule proportion of all homicides. However, there are certain aspects of stranger homicides which lend themselves to preventive measures. One relates to hate-crimes, both homosexual and racial; another relates to the availability of firearms and the corresponding legislation. Homicides between indigenous people and between non-English speaking background people, although they can contain similarities with "mainstream" homicides, also have their own unique components.

Conclusion

Because homicide is not one type of crime, the identification of risk factors involved in different categories of homicide can generate appropriate interventions and preventive strategies. For instance, the high vulnerability of children under the age of one could perhaps be alleviated by more consistent and thorough parent support programs, particularly for "at risk" parents. Adequate resources should be allocated to health and welfare agencies so that they can better coordinate the identification of children who have been subjected to periodic or consistent physical abuse. In a similar manner, but with the added cooperation of criminal justice agencies, women in domestic violence situations could be better protected through the development of social indicators and the evaluation of various intervention programs. More credence also needs to be given to Apprehended Violence Orders.

When examining strategies to prevent homicide, the fact that the most common perpetrators are males in the 15-29 year age group cannot be overlooked. What is it about some young Australian men which pre-disposes them to violence? Is it peer pressure? Is it a question of sexuality? Is it alcohol abuse? Is it drug abuse? Is it a lack of support network? Is it a significant function of a broader social setting? These are all questions which beg research. Until such research is completed, little progress will be made in this area. More attention must also be given to the over-representation of Aboriginal people in homicide statistics, both as victims and offenders, particularly in "domestic" situations.

Acknowledgment

The Australian Institute of Criminology gratefully acknowledges the cooperation and support of all Australian Police Services in the preparation of this report.

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