



No. 61

# Violent Crime in Australia: Interpreting the Trends

David Indermaur

*Fear of violent crime is greater today than in recent memory. So too are Australian police statistics on the incidence of violent crime.*

*The interpretation of crime statistics and of public attitudes should, however, be undertaken with care. Even before this year's tragic massacre at Port Arthur, most Australians had formed the impression that violence in our society had reached unprecedented levels. Yet analysis of the data show that the situation is more complex. By all accounts, violence was significantly higher in 19th century Australia than it is today. Although homicide rates have almost doubled since the end of World War Two, they have remained relatively stable for the past 20 years.*

*This paper suggests that homicide levels are a good indicator of levels of violence generally, and that as homicide data are reliable and show no increase in the rate of homicide, it follows that trends in non-lethal violence are commensurate. Evidence for this is borne out by victimisation surveys. This proposition will certainly generate debate, and can be tested only by regular, standardised, comparable victim surveys.*

*There are two main sources of authoritative data in Australia, police data and victim survey data. While police statistics on non-fatal forms of violence such as assault show dramatic increases over the past 20 years, victim survey data reveal no increase in this offence. The essay which follows explores this apparent paradox.*

*It might also be suggested that increases in statistics of reported violent crime reflect an improved proficiency in recording by police of operational data, and growing intolerance by public and by police of aggressive behaviour which a generation ago would not have been defined as criminal. One needs only look to domestic violence for an illustrative example of violent crime which, although historically common, has only recently begun to attract the attention of the criminal justice system.*

*There are, however, certain aspects of Australian life which appear to carry greater risks than in the past. One might speculate, for example, that extended trading hours might be associated with more alcohol-related aggressive behaviour in certain settings.*

*Although this paper argues that trend data on violence do not paint a picture of significant growth, it should not be interpreted to suggest that the level of violence in Australia today is in any way acceptable. The contribution of this paper lies in the insights which it provides on the analysis and interpretation of crime statistics, and its identification of such important underlying factors as changes in the demographic profile of Australian society. It also helps provide a context for important policy initiatives such as the Australian Violence Prevention Awards, and the National Campaign Against Violence and Crime.*

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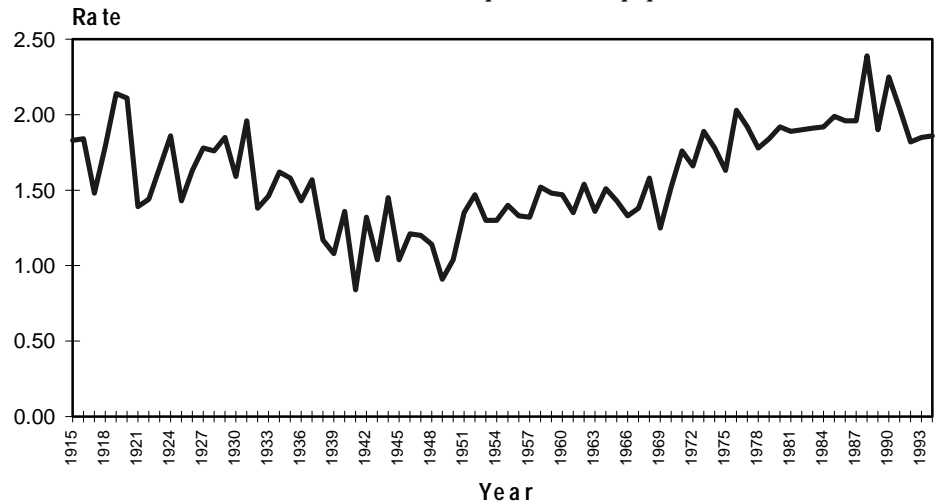
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Public Opinion Surveys continue to show that violent crime is one of the most prominent concerns of Australians in the 1990s. Furthermore, it is widely accepted by the public and politicians that the level of violent crime in Australia is increasing. This perception of increasing danger and the associated fear of crime has been blamed for breeding distrust and decreasing the quality of life of Australians. But is this fear of crime misplaced? Is violent crime really increasing? This paper will address this question and describe in broad brush terms what we know about trends in violent crime.

### Indicators of Violence

The main problem in trying to find out the actual level of violent crime is that most of it is not reported to the police. Community surveys measuring victimisation go some way to giving a more complete picture of crime. There have been three major national victimisation surveys in Australia conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (in 1975, 1983 and 1993). In the 1993 survey, the proportion of victims of violent crime reporting the offence to the police ranged from a quarter of sexual assault victims to a third of assault victims and half of robbery victims. There have been a number of state-based victimisation surveys since the 1990s and these have also found similar rates of under-reporting. Although direct comparisons between these surveys may be misleading because of changes in methodology, it is fair to conclude that most violent crimes are not reported to the police. This observation is not limited to Australia: it is a phenomenon that occurs worldwide with the greatest discrepancy between all violence and reported violence occurring in underdeveloped countries.

**Figure 1.** Trends in the homicide rate, Australia 1915-1994, Rate = Number of homicides per 100 000 population



**Source:** Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Causes of Death*, compiled in Mukherjee, Scandia, Dagger & Matthews (1989 with updates).

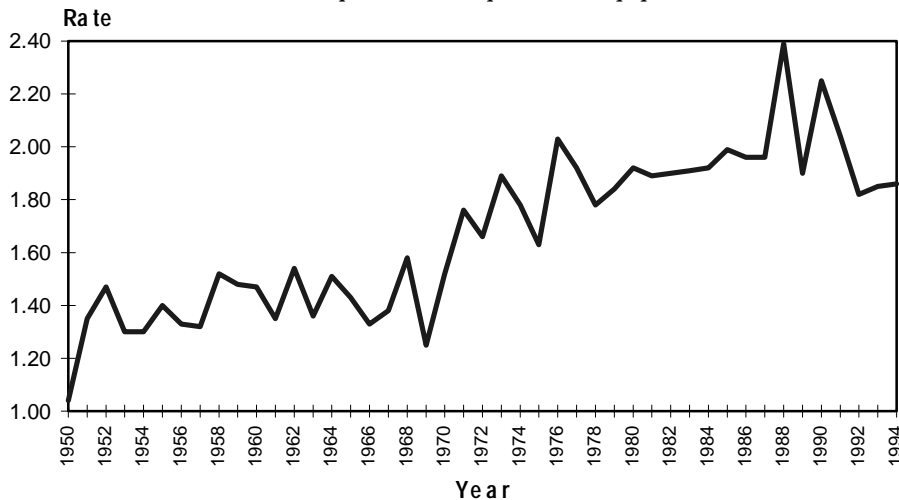
Because of the large proportion of violent crime that is unreported (that is, what criminologists call the “dark figure of crime”), the dramatic increases observed in violent crime as measured by the police may be directly related to improved effectiveness and efficiency with which the police record crime. In other words, the police may be recording more crimes of violence because they are recording crimes that in previous times would not have been recorded. Increases in police records of violent crime might reflect the shrinking of the dark figure of crime rather than an increase in underlying violence in the community. Cutting into the dark figure of crime may result from increases in police numbers and improvements in technology as well as changes in police policy and attitudes that result in more vigorous policing.

Some attempts to counter this bias in the police figures have looked at alternative sources of information on the extent of violent crime, such as hospital admissions and historical accounts. Even a cursory consideration of history—including relatively recent times—highlights the widespread use of violence. One particularly interesting and rele-

vant consideration is that much of the violence that occurred in earlier times was not defined by the perpetrator nor the victim as a “crime” as it would be today. For example, the routine use of corporal punishment in schools, would not now be tolerated. Many such incidents and many incidents of family violence that went unacknowledged in the past would today be recorded as assaults. As violence is defined more and more as a crime and is tolerated less and less, it is likely that we are becoming more aware of its extent thereby creating the perception of an increase.

Unfortunately, historical accounts do not provide the kind of systematic and continuous records needed for scientific study. However, there is one measure of violent crime that is not subject to the problems that plague most of the police records. This violent offence also happens to be the most serious form of violence: homicide. Almost all homicides have been accurately recorded by the police for a long period and thus we have a long set of reliable data which represents a veritable oasis in a desert of poor data. Because of the unique advantages that homicide offers it has been the major indicator of violence levels around the world and serves as a “gold stand-

**Figure 2.** Post-war homicide rate, Australia, 1950-1994.  
Rate = Number of per homicides per 100 000 population



**Source:** Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Causes of Death*, compiled in Mukherjee, Scandia, Dagger & Matthews (1989 with updates).

ard” of the level of violent crime. It is important, therefore, to study the homicide rate for what it can tell us about the real change in the level of violence in Australia. Following this we will consider the rate of the most common violent crime, assault, as measured by police statistics and also victimisation surveys.

### Homicide

In terms of international comparisons, Australia is generally observed to have a moderate level of interpersonal violence based on its homicide rate. Based on the 1991 rates, Australia falls between Iceland (1.9) and Canada (2.1), while the United States had a much higher rate (9.1) and England and Wales a much lower one (0.5) (World Health Organization 1992). (Note that rates are expressed as number of homicides per 100 000 population).

In terms of long-term trends in homicide, the most common pattern in western countries such as the US, and the one observed in Australia, is of decreasing rates of homicide from the late 19th century until the 1940s and 1950s and then an upswing from mid-century (Figure 1).

As shown in Figure 1, the homicide rate from 1915 to 1925 was as high as it is today. Other studies (for example, Grabosky 1977) suggest an even higher rate throughout most of the 19th century. The homicide rate in Australia fell from 1930 to 1950, remained at this fairly low level until the late 1960s but then increased substantially to a plateau of about 1.9 per 100 000 population in the 1970s and 1980s. The highest rate reached in the post-war period was 2.4 per 100 000 in 1988 (see Figure 2). This is more than double the rate observed in 1950.

The trend in the post-war period has been subject to various mathematical analyses. One analysis breaks the trend into two distinct components—the period from 1951 to 1970 and the period from 1971 to 1988. One reason for breaking the post-war period into these two components is that the average rate in each component is significantly different. The average in the 1951-70 period was 1.4 per 100 000 population whilst in the 1971-88 period it was 1.9 per 100 000. This analysis suggests that the most substantial and significant component of change in the homicide rate in the post-war period has been the increase by a

third in mean homicide rate between these two periods.

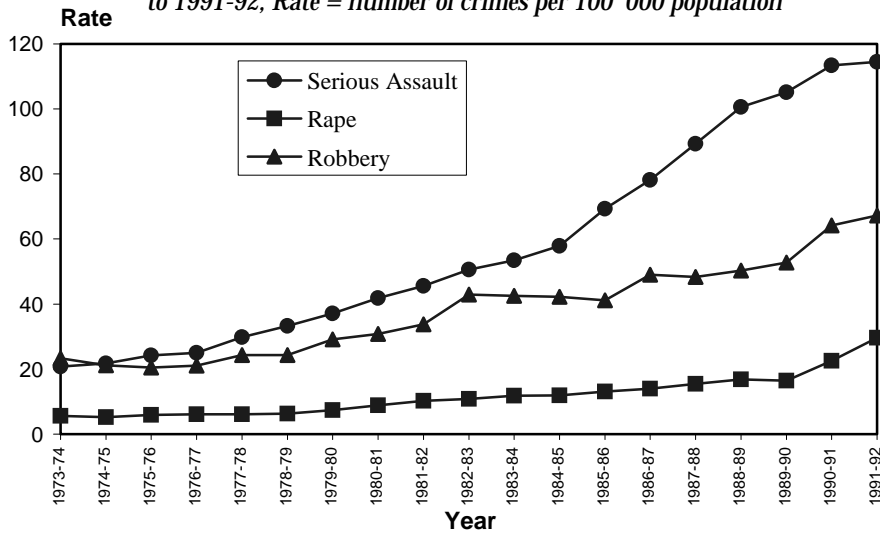
As there has been no substantial rise in the level of homicide since the 1970s, it is fair to conclude that the real level of violence in Australia has not increased over the last 20 years. Furthermore, the increase that did occur between the 1951-70 period and the 1971-88 period is most likely explained by the changing demography of the Australian population. The proportion of the population accounted for by young males was at an historically low ebb during the middle part of the century and the resurgence in the strength of this sector is the most conservative explanation for the observed change in the homicide rate. This will be discussed in more detail later; the point to establish here is that analysis of the homicide rate, the most reliable indicator of violence in the community, provides no support for the belief that there has been a significant rise in the real level of violence over the last 20 years.

### Police Recorded Violent Crime

In direct contrast to what is indicated by the homicide rate, police records of violent crime show consistent and significant increases over the last 20 years as shown in Figure 3 for serious assault, rape and robbery.

Although the rate of serious assault recorded by the police increased 452 per cent between 1974 and 1992, the homicide rate in 1992 was the same as it was in 1974. So we have here a dilemma, while police records of non-fatal violent crime show consistent increases over the last 20 years, there is no such trend in the homicide rate. One way to address this dilemma is to consider what community surveys of victimisation tell us about the underlying level of violence in the community.

**Figure 3.** Police recorded serious assault, rape and robbery, Australia, 1973-74 to 1991-92, Rate = number of crimes per 100 000 population



Source: Walker 1994, pp. 6-7.

### Victimisation Surveys

One possibility is that the rise in police recorded crime reflects increased reporting of crimes to the police. Although there is no evidence from the victimisation surveys of an increase from 1983 to 1993 in the proportion of assault victims reporting to the police, it may be that the police are recording more offences reported to them. This possibility exists because it has been shown that one cannot assume that there is any direct relation between the reporting rate indicated by victimisation surveys and the number of offences recorded by the police (see Indermaur 1995). The victimisation surveys themselves show no indication of an increase in the rate of "personal attacks" (assaults). In fact, the rate dropped substantially from 1983 (3.4 per cent) to 1993 (2.5 per cent). This apparent drop might have been the result of changing methodologies of victimisation surveys. For example, there are some indications that the technique (mail-back) used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1993 resulted in fewer assaults being reported compared to the technique (personal interview) used in 1975 and 1983. These problems have been discussed

elsewhere (for example, Indermaur 1995). All that can be safely concluded from the victimisation surveys at this point is that there is no evidence of even slight, let alone substantial, increases in the level of assault. Together with the homicide figures the victimisation survey findings question whether the police figures can be taken at face value.

### Discrepancies between the Indicators

The results discussed thus far note that although homicide rates have remained fairly stable for the last 20 years, police figures show large increases in most forms of non-fatal violent crime. Further, victimisation surveys fail to find evidence of even a slight increase; in fact all the evidence points the other way.

Given these discrepancies we need to seriously consider the possibility that the rise in violence reflected in the police figures is not the result of changes in the "real" level of violence in the community but the result of a range of factors that can be summarised as "police productivity". Police productivity can be taken to include a range of factors likely to enhance the performance of the police in detecting and recording offences.

These factors include increased police numbers, improvements in technology, record keeping and data base management. Also important in enhancing police productivity are changes to procedures that make it easier and more attractive for the police and victims to report crimes and easier for police to process a report. The development of various victims' services and a more supportive attitude on the part of the police will break down many of the barriers that existed in the past. Police productivity will also grow as a result of changes in police attitudes and policy that take each report seriously and actively support or demand the recording of the offence by the police.

A number of criminologists have argued that it is police productivity and not real increases in violence that explain increases in police recorded violence. For example, and most recently, O'Brien (1996) examined the differences between police records and victimisation survey findings in the United States. As in Australia, it is only the police figures that are suggesting increasing levels of violence, both the homicide rate and victimisation survey findings suggest the level of violence has not changed over the last 20 years. O'Brien conducted extensive statistical analyses searching for an explanation of the differences between the measures. He concluded that it was increases in police productivity that provided the best explanation of increases in police recorded non-fatal violent crime. It is reasonable to suspect that this is also the best explanation for increases in police recorded non-fatal violent crime rates in Australia as well.

In Australia, the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research conducted a study investigating the possible causes of the rise in the rate of police recorded non-aggravated assault in New South Wales (Bonney & Kery

1991). The study concluded that the increase could largely be attributed to an increase in police willingness to record assaults against themselves combined with an increase in the willingness of domestic violence victims to report offences to the police. Both of these factors reflect an increase in police productivity rather than an increase in the underlying rate of violence in the community.

One other reason to suspect that police productivity is central in explaining the increase in police recorded violent crime is that the increase in the serious assault rate and other violent crimes as measured by the police has been consistent; the year-to-year variation observed with the homicide rate is not evident. Such a consistent rise might suggest that there is some underlying phenomenon that has been consistently increasing in the same way that can explain this particular pattern. The most likely contender here is the increasing size of the police force and police facilities. In Figure 4, the increase in the rate of police expenditure in Australia (expressed as dollars spent on the police for every man, woman and child in Australia) is shown together with the increase in the rate

of police recorded serious assault.

### Interpreting the Rates

Although interpreting crime rates can be hazardous, there are some important points of agreement that are not in dispute. These are listed below to establish the starting point for further discussion.

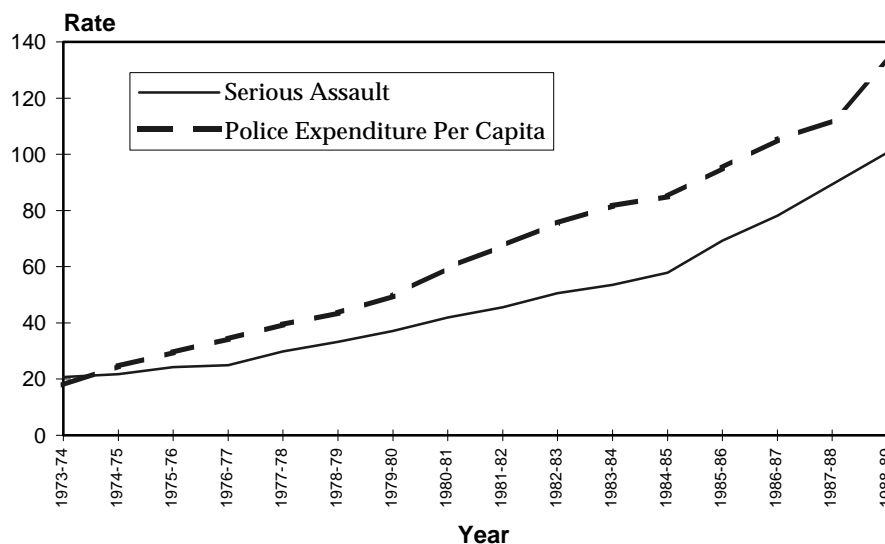
- Very long-term analyses show the level of violence in Australia as measured by the homicide rate to be at the same level or lower than it was 80 years ago.
- The indication from studies, based on UK and USA data, is that the homicide rate at the beginning of the century was lower than in the 19th century and over the very long term the level of violence has been decreasing since the middle ages (see Gurr 1989).
- In Australia and most other western countries there has been a significant and substantial increase in the homicide level since the historic low point reached in mid-twentieth century.
- Police records of crime, including most forms of violent crime, have increased consistently and substan-

- tially over the last 30 years.
- Both the homicide figures and the assault victimisation figures suggest a period of stability in violence from 1975 to 1994.
- Compared with other similar western countries such as New Zealand and Canada, Australia's homicide rate is moderate, suggesting the prominent role of socio-cultural factors rather than any particular or peculiar aspect of Australia's policy, practice or population.

The most significant feature of the post-war rise in homicide rates is the shift upwards that occurred between the 1960s and 1970s. Because the teenage/young adult sector of the population is over-represented amongst all groups of offenders, it is natural to suspect that changes in the proportion of the population in this age range will affect a nation's homicide rate. This demographic effect has been well established in the United States (for example, Cohen & Land 1987) and provides the most convenient explanation of the sudden rise in violence around the late 1960s in that country (due to the entrance of the baby boomers into the teenage years).

Australia's homicide rate increased by a third between the 1951-70 period and the 1971-88 period. Similarly, between 1955 and 1971 the proportion of Australia's male population that was aged 18 to 24 increased by a third. It is interesting to note that throughout the 20th century the proportion of Australia's population accounted for by this sector has been steady or falling slightly. Therefore, rather than seeing the 1960s and 1970s as being an upswing in this section of the population it would be more correct to conceptualise the 1950s and 1960s as a period where the relative strength of the sector was historically low. This suggests a more accurate and useful way of

**Figure 4.** Number of serious assaults per 100 000 population and number of dollars spent on the police per head of population in Australia, 1973-74 to 1988-89



Source: Walker 1994, pp. 6-7; Mukherjee & Dagger 1990.

viewing the trends in the 20th century homicide rate. Rather than seeing increases, we should perhaps see the graph as one of long-term stability with a two-decade respite made possible by the relative depletion of young men in the 1950s and 1960s.

Age, however, does not operate independently from other variables. Gartner and Parker (1990) examined data from five nations over 70 years to test the generalisability of the homicide-age relationship that was discovered in the United States. These authors demonstrated that the age-homicide relationship did not hold for all five nations examined and needs to be understood as the result of an interaction between age and other cultural and social variables. They found the presence of a strong post-war age effect in Italy and the United States and the absence of one in England and Wales, Japan and Scotland. Gartner and Parker (1990, p. 365) explained these effects in terms of the nature of homicides in the United States and Italy as compared to the other countries:

*The picture that emerges for both Italy and the United States is of a homicide rate dominated by conflicts between males and enhanced by both the presence of firearms and the absence of cultural barriers to interpersonal violence.*

It can be noted that Australia shares much in common with the United States. In Australia, as in Italy and the United States, the majority of homicides are inter-male. If it can be assumed that Australia conforms to the "aggressive male culture" pattern observed in the United States and Italy, then as the young male proportion of the population increases so will the homicide rate.

Gartner and Parker's analysis is important in illustrating that violence is not the result of a single cause or even a single category of

causes. Rather, the rate of violence, as reflected in the homicide rate, is an expression of multiple factors and complex interactions. The pressure to conceptualise violence as the result of simple or singular phenomena needs to be resisted. Some of the relevant factors may be changing in such a way as to reduce violence while others are pushing in the opposite direction. For example, cultural sensitivities may be changing in such a way that displays of aggressiveness are less acceptable now than in the past and, at the same time, increasing availability of drugs and weapons, alienation and reduced social cohesion may be facilitating an increased propensity for violence in certain groups.

### Conclusion

This brief consideration of trends in violent crime in Australia has emphasised the complexity of the task and the inadequacy of the data. The limitations discussed point to the need for cautiousness in interpreting the rates. Certainly, and most importantly, the popular understanding that violence in this country has increased dramatically and consistently in recent years is unfounded.

Despite the difficulty in understanding overall trends in violence and the need for more research, it is possible, on the basis of existing information, to isolate some factors that may be thought of as "violence facilitators" such as cultural attitudes to violence, alcohol consumption patterns, and the availability of firearms. To reduce the rate of violence, public policy should focus on undermining the acceptability of violence at all levels of society as well as identifying the risk factors that are associated with violence. The National Campaign Against Violence and Crime, and the Australian Violence Prevention Awards are two such policy mechanisms.

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