



No.90

# Homicide between Intimate Partners in Australia

Carlos Carcach and Marianne James

*The National Homicide Monitoring Program database at the Australian Institute of Criminology reveals that during the period 1 July 1989 to 30 June 1996, just over one-quarter of the 2024 homicide incidents, where the offender was known, involved intimate partners. These include spouses, ex-spouses, those in current or former de facto relationships, boyfriends, girlfriends, or partners of same-sex relationships: in other words, all relationships where the underlying dynamics are similar.*

*In almost 4 out of 5 intimate-partner homicides, the perpetrator was a male and the victim a female. In a little over 1 in 5 incidents, the homicides were committed by a female against a male. A small number corresponded to killings among partners in same-sex relationships. One-third of intimate-partner homicides resulted from conflicts associated with jealousy or the termination of a relationship. The remaining incidents arose from domestic arguments.*

*By its own definition intimate-partner homicide raises difficult policy issues. Intimate-partner homicides occur in the intimacy of the home where the amount of external social control is very limited, or non-existent. They may also raise questions relating to the availability and use of lethal weapons, as well as to the inter-relationship of family law and criminal justice. This paper forms the basis of a profile of intimate relationships which end in homicide. With expansion, through other data sources such as Coroner's Reports and Court transcripts, additional knowledge could be gained of the nature of the day-to-day relationships between victims and offenders and the circumstances surrounding the incident. This could, in turn, be used as a diagnostic tool for the prevention and treatment of domestic violence in general.*

**Adam Graycar**  
Director

In this paper, the term **homicide** refers to a person killed, and a **homicide incident** is an event in which one or more persons are killed at the same place and time. Intimate partner homicides are those involving spouses, ex-spouses, persons in current or former de facto relationships, boyfriends, or girlfriends, or partners of same-sex relationships.

This paper identifies patterns and trends in intimate homicide in Australia. It discusses the most salient features of homicide incidents involving intimate partners using data held 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 occurred, including time, location, and weapon employed. Data are derived exclusively from police records, supplemented as necessary with information provided directly by

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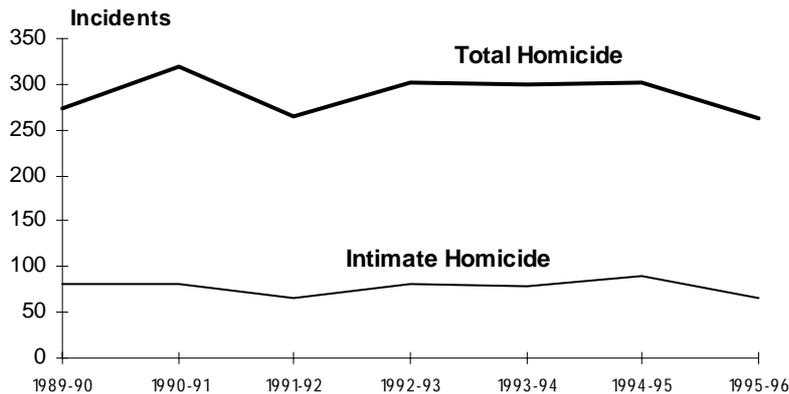
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**Figure 1: AUSTRALIA, Total homicide incidents and homicide incidents involving intimate partners, 1 July 1989-30 June 1996**



police involved in individual homicide investigations. The circumstances of homicide are rather complex, and a degree of subjective judgment may be exercised both by police in recording information relating to each case, and by Australian Institute of Criminology staff in coding the data. Moreover, some facts relating to the incident, the victim, and/or the perpetrator, may not be identifiable.

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 databases, such as those relating to vital statistics and

causes of death.<sup>1</sup> These marginal differences are unlikely to detract significantly from the comparisons made and the inferences drawn. A little over 25 per cent of the 2226 homicide incidents occurring in Australia during the 7 years from 1 July 1989 to 30 June 1996, where the offender was known, involved intimate partners. This paper takes the view that intimate homicide is qualitatively different from other types of homicides. The analyses that follow, besides focusing on the characteristics of homicide incidents involving intimate partners, will compare them with other types of homicide incidents.

### Trends in Intimate Homicide

The annual number of intimate

<sup>1</sup> Refer to James and Carcach (1997) for a description of the databases of the Homicide Monitoring Program.

<sup>2</sup> Caution must be exercised when comparing Tasmania and the ACT with other jurisdictions owing to their small numbers of homicide incidents.

**Table 1: AUSTRALIA, Intimate homicides gender of offender-victim by type of relationship, 1 July 1989 to 30 June 1996**

Type of relationship	Gender of offender-victim				Total
	Male to female	Female to male	Male to male	Female to female	
Husband-wife	143	35	na	na	178
Separated husband-wife	55	5	na	na	60
Divorced husband-wife	6	0	na	na	6
De facto	120	52	na	na	172
Former de facto	42	15	na	na	57
Girlfriend/boyfriend	33	5	na	na	38
Former girlfriend/boyfriend	17	3	na	na	20
Homosexual	na	na	10	2	12
<b>All intimate homicides</b>	<b>416</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>543</b>
<b>All non-intimate homicides</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>1141</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>1481</b>

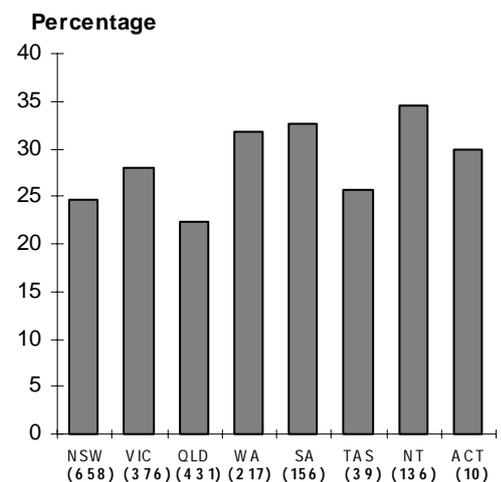
na Not Applicable

homicide incidents in Australia has not shown significant temporal variation over the period from 1989 to 1996. It has remained at a relatively constant level (see Figure 1). Over the past 20 years in the United States, the number of intimate partner homicides has decreased by roughly one-third. The declining trend in intimate homicides in the United States has been linked inter alia to factors such as shifts in patterns of family formation associated with declining domesticity, the improved economic status of women, and increases in the availability of domestic violence services (see for example Zimring et al. 1983, Dugan et al. 1997). Australian data on the other hand, suggest that intimate homicide has remained stable, at least in the seven-year period under review.

As Figure 2 shows, there is some variation in the percentage of intimate-partner incidents across the States and Territories of Australia. This type of incident seems to be less common in Queensland than in other jurisdictions. Note that the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia record the largest percentages of intimate-partner homicides during the 7 years from 1 July 1989 to 30 June 1996.<sup>2</sup>

As the bottom row of Table 1 shows, non-intimate homicides overwhelmingly occur between

**Figure 2: AUSTRALIA, STATES & TERRITORIES, Intimate homicide incidents as a percentage of total homicide incidents, 1 July 1989-30 June 1996**



males. Male on male homicides comprise 77 per cent of all non-intimate homicide incidents. A male killed a female in 16 per cent of these non-intimate incidents, while a female killed a male in 4 per cent of cases.

Intimate homicides are also predominantly committed by males, but in this context most of the victims are females. In 77 per cent of homicide incidents involving intimate partners, a male killed a female; while a female killed a male in 21 per cent of these incidents. A small number (2 per cent) corresponded to killings among partners in same-sex relationships (see Table 1). Overall, the offender was female in 22 per cent of intimate homicide incidents compared with 7 per cent of non-intimate homicide incidents.

In 63 per cent of the intimate homicides when a male killed a female, the persons involved were in a current spousal relationship (either married or de facto). This was the case for 76 per cent of incidents where a female killed a male, but this difference was not statistically significant. Overall, the number of killings of a male by a female in intimate homicides was approximately one-quarter of the killings of a female by a male.

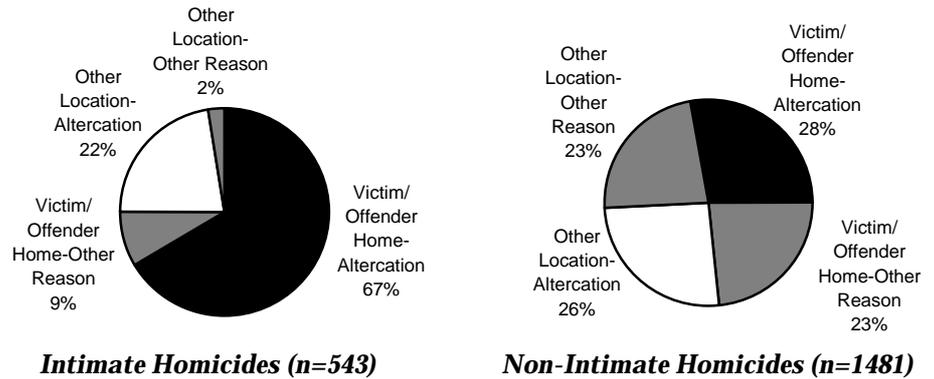
### The Context of Intimate Homicides

#### Place of Occurrence and Factors associated with the Incident

One way to analyse a homicide incident is by combining information about its location and related circumstances. Figure 3 shows that 67 per cent of intimate homicide incidents are the result of altercations of a domestic nature occurring at the victim's or

<sup>3</sup> According to the classification system used as part of the National Homicide Monitoring Program, altercations of a domestic or romantic nature include those concerning general domestic matters, desertion or termination of an intimate relationship, and jealousy and/or rivalry.

**Figure 3: AUSTRALIA, Homicides, percentage of incidents according to place of occurrence and circumstances by whether they are intimate homicides or not, 1 July 1989-30 June 1996**



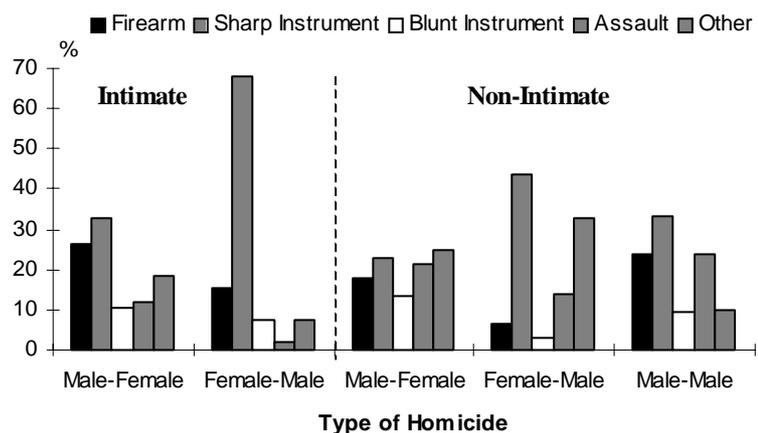
the offender's home.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, non-intimate homicide incidents are more evenly distributed across location-circumstance combinations. Intimate homicide incidents are more frequent in places with a minimal level of guardianship (that is, law enforcement or third-party presence) or where privacy is maximal.

#### Means of Killing

Figure 4 shows that a sharp instrument such as a knife is the most frequently used weapon in both intimate and non-intimate homicide incidents.<sup>4</sup> It also indicates that sharp instruments are

<sup>4</sup> Homicide incidents where a male killed a female seem to be the only exception. Figure 4 suggests that offenders in this type of homicide are equally as likely to use a sharp instrument, assault or other method weapon/method of killing.

**Figure 4: AUSTRALIA, Intimate and non-intimate homicide incidents, percentage of incidents according to weapon/method used by gender of offender-victim, 1 July 1989-30 June 1996**



more commonly used in intimate homicide incidents where females kill males. No major differences are detectable between intimate and non-intimate homicide incidents regarding weapon or method used.

### Factors Associated with the Occurrence of Intimate Homicides

As the previous discussion suggests, a number of factors are associated with the risk of intimate homicide. Location of homicides and the victim-offender relationship are related to socio-demographic characteristics of victims and offenders (see Messner & Tardiff 1985). Characteristics associated with individuals spending more time at home should be associated

**Table 2: Homicides involving intimate partners compared to other homicides, incident and victim-offender characteristics 1 July 1989-30 June 1996**

Characteristics	Percentage of incidents	
	Intimate-partner homicides	Other homicides
<b>Incident characteristics</b>		
Related to a domestic altercation and occurring in the offender or victim's home	**63.2	10.7
Related to a domestic altercation and occurring at a location other than the offender or victim's home	**20.3	4.5
Not related to a domestic altercation and occurring in the offender or victim's home	**12.0	40.3
Not related to a domestic altercation and occurring at a location other than the offender or victim's home	**4.6	44.5
Taking place in Western Australia, South Australia or the Northern Territory	30.8	23.1
Occurring from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m.	64.8	63.4
Occurring on a Saturday	**14.0	20.3
Offender used a firearm, or a sharp instrument or strangled the victim	*74.6	63.0
<b>Offender characteristics</b>		
Male	*78.5	89.6
Born in Australia	69.1	69.0
Caucasian	70.7	70.0
Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander	**21.7	14.3
Not working	53.5	56.0
Under the influence of alcohol at the time of the incident	36.1	38.9
Previous criminal record	29.3	37.3
Mean age (years)	**36.0	27.0
<b>Victim characteristics</b>		
Female	**75.3	21.3
Born in Australia	67.2	70.4
Caucasian	*70.0	76.6
Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander	**20.3	12.0
Not working	**57.7	46.1
Under the influence of alcohol at the time of the incident	31.3	33.3
Previous criminal record	19.0	17.2
Mean age (years)	34.0	33.0

\*\* The statistic for intimate-partner incidents is significantly different from the percentage for other types of homicide incidents ( $p < 0.01$ ).

\* The statistic for intimate-partner incidents is significantly different from the percentage for other types of homicide incidents ( $p < 0.05$ ).

with a higher risk of homicides occurring at or near the home. Since the time people spend at home varies during different times of the day or days of the week, homicides at or near the home are expected to occur at those times with the highest concentration of routine activities around the household. In addition, activities concentrated around the household are more likely to involve family members and friends. On the other hand, activities away from the home are more likely to involve strangers.

It has been shown that homicide incidents resulting from domestic altercations which occur at the victim's or offender's home

are more likely to involve intimate partners than incidents attributable to other causes which occur at places other than the victim's or offender's home.

Table 2 summarises the most important characteristics of homicide incidents considered for analysis. The typical offender of intimate-partner and non-intimate partner homicide is male. While the typical victim of intimate-partner homicide is female, the typical victim of non-intimate homicide is male.

Table 2 also shows that offenders and victims of intimate-partner homicide incidents tend to be a similar age, while offenders of non-intimate homicide tend

to be younger than their victims.

Intimate-partner homicides seem to be more likely than non-intimate homicides to involve both offenders and victims of Aboriginal racial appearance (see Table 2). No differences are detectable for incidents involving both offenders and victims of Caucasian racial appearance.

Victims of intimate-partner homicide incidents are more likely than those of non-intimate homicide incidents not to be in the paid workforce. No differences are detectable between these types of incident regarding the working status of offenders.

The figures in Table 2 also suggest that alcohol consumption does not seem to be a major issue regarding intimate-partner homicide, nor is the previous criminal record of offenders and victims.<sup>5</sup>

### Predicting the Incidence of Intimate-Partner Homicide

The information contained in Table 2 highlights the complexity of forces operating on the likelihood of a homicide incident involving intimate partners. It is reasonable to expect that this likelihood be affected by a variety of factors which can be linked to each other. The main effect of these interactions is the suppression, but also the magnification, of possible links between the occurrence of intimate-partner homicide and its associated factors.

A multivariate model was fitted to the data to assess the effect of several victim, offender and incident characteristics on the probability that a homicide will involve intimate partners.<sup>6</sup> The model controls for the effect

<sup>5</sup> Missing data weaken results concerning alcohol consumption and previous criminal record. Criminal record and alcohol involvement were recorded as unknown for about one-quarter of the victim and offender records. The assumption was made that these cases corresponded to offenders and/or victims who were not under the influence of alcohol and/or did not have a criminal record.

of location of incident and its circumstances. This probability can be used to estimate the magnitude of the effect that each variable has on the likelihood of an intimate homicide occurring.

Table 3 shows the results after the best model was fitted to the data. This best model includes only those variables which had a significant effect on the risk of a homicide incident involving intimate partners.

*The Contextual Setting of Homicide Incidents Involving Intimate Partners*

The results shown in Table 3 (and are similar to those presented in Figure 4) confirm that intimate homicide incidents occur more frequently at home where the level of guardianship is minimal. More specifically, the figures in Table 3 show that

- homicide incidents resulting from a domestic altercation and occurring in the offender or victim’s home are 37 times more likely to involve intimate partners than those homicide incidents that are not related to domestic altercations and occur at a location other than the offender or the victim’s home;
- homicide incidents resulting from a domestic altercation and occurring at a location other than the offender or victim’s home are 26 times more likely to involve intimate partners than those homicide incidents that are not related to domestic altercations and occur at a location other than the offender or the victim’s home;
- homicide incidents not resulting from a domestic altercation and occurring in the offender or victim’s home are more than twice as

**Table 3: Odds of a homicide incident involving intimate partners according to victim-offender relationship, demographic characteristics of victim and offender, and incident characteristics, 1 July 1989 to 30 June 1996**

Variable	Odds of intimate-partner involvement
Related to a domestic altercation and occurring in the offender or victim’s home	**37.2
Related to a domestic altercation and occurring at a location other than the offender or victim’s home	**25.7
Not related to a domestic altercation and occurring in the offender or victim’s home	**2.2
Offender is male and victim is female	**10.7
Both offender and victim are of Aboriginal racial appearance	*1.8
Victim is not in the paid workforce	*1.6
Offender uses a firearm or a sharp instrument or strangles the victim	*1.6
Incident occurs on a day other than Saturday	*1.6

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .  
\*  $p < 0.05$ .

likely to involve intimate partners than homicide incidents not related to domestic altercations which occur at a location other than the offender or the victim’s home.

*Gender of Victim and Offender*

The proposition that homicidal violence is a predominantly masculine activity is well established in the literature (see Wallace 1986, Daly & Wilson 1988, Polk 1994). The data show that for non-intimate homicides, male on female incidents are 4 times more common than female on male incidents. For intimate homicides, male on female incidents exceed female on male incidents by a factor of 3.6 (see the last row in Table 1). The results shown in Table 3 indicate that after controlling for the effect of other factors, homicide incidents where the offender is male and the victim is female are 10.7 times more likely to involve intimate partners as those where the offender is female and the victim is male.

It must be borne in mind that homicide is a rare occurrence in Australia, and homicides where the offender is female are even less common. Intimate-partner homicides, unlike other homicides, occur not only in the

context of relationships that are characterised by the close social proximity between offenders and victims, but also tend to occur in the privacy of the home. Intimate-partner homicide is the most serious form of domestic violence, and may be the result of domestic conflicts that possibly have been going on for relatively long periods of time. Previous research indicates that these killings are often the unplanned consequence of events that escalate out of control (Silverman & Kennedy 1993).

*Labour Force Status of Victim and Offender*

The analyses suggest that homicide incidents where the victim is not in the paid workforce are 1.6 times more likely to be of an intimate-partner nature as those where the victim is in paid work (see Table 3). The working status of the offender has no impact on the likelihood of a homicide incident involving intimate partners. Table 2 indicates that offenders of both intimate and non-intimate homicide are equally as likely to be not working as to be working.

The economic status of the offenders of intimate-partner homicides, as assessed from the

<sup>6</sup> The model in question was a logistic regression. The dependent variable was whether the homicide incident involved intimate partners, or not.

measure of paid work used in this study, is the same or better than that of the victim.

### Racial Appearance

Homicide incidents where both the offender and the victim are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander racial appearance are almost twice as likely to involve intimate partners as other homicide incidents.

### Weapon/Method

Homicide incidents where the offender uses a firearm or a sharp instrument or he/she strangles the victim are 1.5 times more likely to be of an intimate-partner nature as homicide incidents where the offender resorts to other methods to kill the victim.

### Day of the Week of Occurrence

Homicide incidents occurring on a day of the week other than Saturday are 1.6 times more likely to involve intimate partners than homicide incidents occurring on a Saturday. Incidents occurring on Saturdays more often involve strangers or persons in a relationship other than intimate partner. Moreover, these incidents occur more frequently in public locations where law enforcement or third party presence is certainly greater than at the home.

## Discussion and Policy Implications

The results of this study suggest that the risk of a homicide incident involving intimate partners can be assessed in terms of the level of exposure, especially by women, to violence at home. This level of exposure to violent domestic situations can be assessed in terms of the routine activities of those involved in intimate-partner homicides.

By its own definition, intimate-partner homicide makes any policy intervention difficult. Intimate-partner homicides occur in the intimacy of the home where the amount of external

social control is very limited, or non-existent. In addition, the reasons behind intimate-partner homicides are of a private and personal nature. One in three intimate-partner homicides result from conflicts associated with either jealousy or the termination of a relationship. The remaining intimate-partner homicide incidents (that is, six out of ten) are classified as "general domestic altercations".<sup>7</sup>

Research on domestic violence and in particular intimate partner homicide is dependent upon reliable and comprehensive data. The National Homicide Monitoring Program collects data on a limited number of aspects relating to the incident, the victim, the offender and the nature of the victim-offender relationship. Valid research into the complex issues related to intimate relationships can only be conducted if more data are collected in a systematic manner. With increased resources, one possibility would be to expand the coverage of the National Homicide Monitoring Program to collect data from Coroner's Reports and Court transcripts regarding the nature of the day-to-day relationship between victims and offenders and the circumstances surrounding the incident. These data could be used to build profiles of intimate relationships ending in homicide, which in turn could be used as a diagnostic tool for the prevention and treatment of domestic violence in general.

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<sup>7</sup> The term 'general domestic altercation' as used in the data collection form of the National Homicide Monitoring Program refers to any argument due to reasons other than jealousy, revenge or termination of a relationship.