



# No. 187 Homicide in Australia 1999–2000

Jenny Mouzos

*Monitoring trends and patterns in homicide in Australia has been made possible through the National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP) and its continued annual collection of data relating to police-recorded homicides since 1989. In June 2000, the first ever compendium of a decade of homicide in Australia was published by the Australian Institute of Criminology (Mouzos 2000a).*

*This paper analyses NHMP data for the most current year—1 July 1999 to 30 June 2000—and provides a statistical snapshot of homicide in Australia. It reports that patterns of homicide have remained largely stable over the year, with 1999–2000 recording a slight decrease compared to the previous year, and with the Northern Territory exhibiting a marked downward trend. Consistent with previous years, more people are killed by stabbing than any other method of homicide, and more people are kicked to death or strangled than shot. Furthermore, people who are not working are more likely to be both offenders and victims of homicide than are people who are employed. Australia recorded a homicide victimisation rate of 1.8 per 100,000 population for the 1999–2000 fiscal year.*

Adam Graycar  
Director

The National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP), established at the Australian Institute of Criminology in 1990, holds data on all homicides coming to the attention of Australian police services. For NHMP purposes, this includes:

- all cases resulting in a person being charged with murder or manslaughter, excluding driving-related fatalities (except where these immediately follow a criminal event, such as armed robbery or motor vehicle theft);
- all murder-suicides classed as murder by police; and
- all other deaths classified by police as homicides although a suspect/offender has yet to be identified or apprehended.

## Trends and Patterns

In 1999–2000, a total of 300 homicide **incidents** occurred in Australia, perpetrated by 324 identified **offenders** and resulting in the death of 337 **persons**. In terms of rates, Australia recorded a homicide victimisation rate of 1.8 per 100,000 residents<sup>1</sup> for 1999–2000. Figure 1 illustrates the rate of homicide from 1989–1990 to 1999–2000. As stated elsewhere (see Mouzos 2000a), the homicide victimisation rate in Australia has demonstrated remarkable stability over this 11-year period. There have, however, been a number of significant events that resulted in an increase in the rate for a given year (Figure 1). The most obvious are: the Port Arthur incident (1995–96); the Strathfield incident (1991–92); the Central Coast incident (1992–93); the Snowtown murders (1998–99); the three murder-suicide incidents in Western Australia (one in 1998–99 and two in 1999–2000); and, more recently, the Childers fire in Queensland which claimed 15 victims.<sup>2</sup>

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A jurisdictional comparison indicates that New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory all experienced lower homicide victimisation rates in comparison to the national rate of 1.8 per 100,000 population (Figure 1). Compared to previous years, the homicide victimisation rate for the Northern Territory declined in 1999–2000 to a rate of 3.09, the lowest recorded rate for the Northern Territory since the inception of the NHMP in 1989 (Figure 1).

### Status of Homicide Investigations

The majority of homicide incidents occurring in Australia are solved or cleared within a relatively short period following the incident. Of the 300 homicide incidents that were recorded in Australia during the period 1 July 1999 to 30 June 2000, 41 (13.7%) were not cleared or had not been solved by police at the time of data collection. ABS statistics indicate that about 70 per cent of murder investigations are finalised within the first month after the incident (ABS 2000a). Homicide detectives would attest that the first 48 to 72 hours after the incident are critical to solving a homicide case (Regini 1997). Research also suggests that if the case is not solved within 48 hours, the chances of it being solved fall markedly (Keppel & Weis 1994).

Comparative analysis of clearance rates across Australia's eight States and Territories indicates that all homicide incidents in the Northern Territory and Tasmania for the year 1999–2000 were solved at the time of data collection (Figure 2). However, it is important to note that few homicide incidents occurred in these jurisdictions in comparison to the more populous jurisdictions of New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland. Therefore, comparisons should only be made between a particular jurisdiction and Australia as a whole.

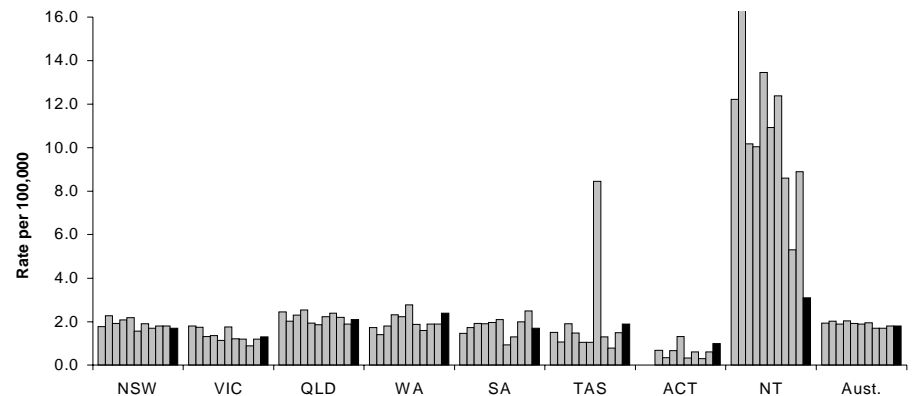
### Weapons / Methods of Homicide

As with previous years (see Mouzos 2000a), the highest proportion of homicide victims between 1 July 1999 and 30 June 2000 were killed with a knife or some other sharp instrument (29.1%) (Table 1). Assaultive force (that is, hands and feet) was the second most common method/weapon used (24.0%), followed by a firearm (n=65; 19.3%). A further 10 per cent of victims were killed with a blunt instrument. Note that 18 per cent

of homicide victims were killed with a weapon classified as "other" in 1999–2000 (Figure 3). This increase in "other weapon" use is primarily a result of the three separate incidents where carbon monoxide poisoning was used to suffocate 12 victims, and also the fire at Childers which claimed 15 lives.

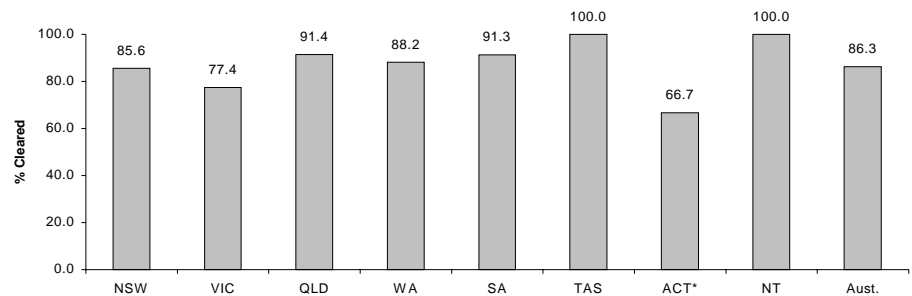
As mentioned, 65 victims were killed with a firearm in 1999–2000 (rate of 0.34 per 100,000 population), with Category H firearms (handguns) accounting for 47.5 per cent (28

**Figure 1:** Australia, States and Territories—homicide victimisation rates per 100,000 population, 1 July 1989 to 30 June 2000



Source: NHMP, AIC

**Figure 2:** Australia, States and Territories—status of investigations, 1 July 1999 to 30 June 2000



\* Note that due to the small incidence of homicide in the ACT, proportions are misleading. Out of the three homicide incidents in the ACT, one remains unclear/unsolved.

Source: NHMP, AIC

**Table 1:** Australia, States and Territories—victims—number and percentage of primary weapon used in homicide, 1999–2000

Primary weapon	Jurisdiction of homicide								
	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	NT	ACT	Aust.
Firearm	24 (21.6)	16 (25.4)	8 (10.7)	6 (13.6)	8 (30.8)	1 (11.1)	2 (33.3)	0 (0.0)	65 (19.3)
Knife*	35 (31.5)	20 (31.7)	16 (21.3)	14 (31.8)	5 (19.2)	4 (44.4)	3 (50.0)	1 (33.3)	98 (29.1)
Hands/feet	27 (24.3)	14 (22.2)	20 (26.7)	6 (13.6)	10 (38.5)	2 (22.2)	0 (0.0)	2 (66.7)	81 (24.0)
Blunt instrument	13 (11.7)	9 (14.3)	5 (6.7)	2 (4.5)	1 (3.8)	1 (11.1)	1 (16.7)	0 (0.0)	32 (9.5)
Other weapon	10 (9.0)	3 (4.8)	22 (29.3)	16 (36.4)	2 (7.7)	1 (11.1)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	54 (16.0)
No weapon	2 (1.8)	1 (1.6)	2 (2.7)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	5 (1.5)
Unknown	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	2 (2.7)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	2 (0.6)
<b>Total</b>									
<b>homicides</b>	<b>111 (100.0)</b>	<b>63 (100.0)</b>	<b>75 (100.0)</b>	<b>44 (100.0)</b>	<b>28 (100.0)</b>	<b>9 (100.0)</b>	<b>6 (100.0)</b>	<b>3 (100.0)</b>	<b>337 (100.0)</b>

Percentages are shown in parentheses.

\* Includes "other sharp instrument".

Source: NHMP, AIC

out of 59)<sup>3</sup> of the firearms used to commit homicide (Figure 4). This is a slight increase compared to previous years (Mouzos 2000b). In the current year, one homicide was committed with an SKS Rifle (75 round). Consistent with previous research (Mouzos 2000b), most firearms used in homicide in 1999–2000 were not registered to the offender (33 out of 44).<sup>4</sup> Similarly, of the 44 identified offenders who used a firearm, only 12 offenders were actually licensed to own that particular firearm.

### Trends in Victim–Offender Relationships

The relationship between the victim and the offender has a great deal to do with the particular kinds of interactions which lead to lethal violence. In Australia, two-fifths (39.8%) of all homicides (where an offender has been identified) for the year 1999–2000 took place within the family (intimates and other family combined). Just over half of these were between spouses, both current and separated, including de facto and sexual intimates, boyfriend, girlfriend and same-sex relationships (n=71), with three-quarters of the latter being committed by a male. Non-intimate family relationships (such as parents, brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents) were evident in nearly 13 per cent of family homicides, while relationships between a parent (custodial, non-custodial or de facto) and a child account for almost 31.8 per cent of family homicides.

A further 12.7 per cent of homicides in the 1999–2000 period occurred between persons regarded as “friends”, and 31.5 per cent occurred between persons who were acquainted with each other. Contrary to the belief that we are most at risk at the hands of a stranger, only about 11 per cent of homicides during this period occurred between persons who were not known to each other.

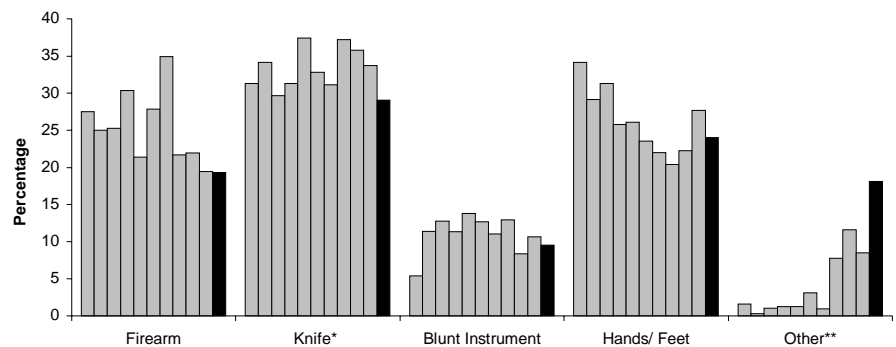
In comparison to previous years (Figure 5), it seems that in 1999–2000, the proportion of homicides committed by strangers has decreased slightly, whereas the proportion of homicides that occurred between friends and acquaintances has increased. Note also the increase in homicide between family members in the most current year. On the other hand intimate partner homicides have remained relatively stable over the 11-year period.

### Victim and Offender Demographics

#### Racial Appearance

Unfortunately, records do not show accurately the race of victims, but rather are indicative of racial appearance. This is frequently no more than a subjective assessment by police and errors and inconsistencies in this sensitive area do occur. In 1999–2000, the majority of

**Figure 3:** Australia, 1 July 1989 to 30 June 2000—yearly distribution of victims by type of weapon

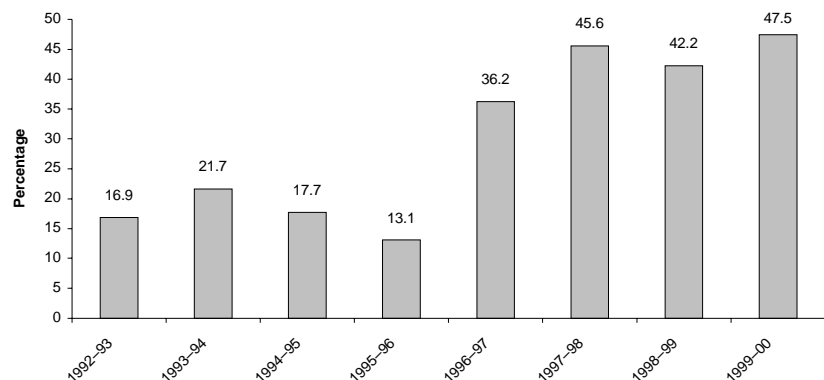


\* Includes “other sharp instrument”.

\*\* “Other” includes fire, poison (including carbon monoxide poisoning), explosives, drugs, motor vehicle, ligature and other weapons.

Source: NHMP, AIC

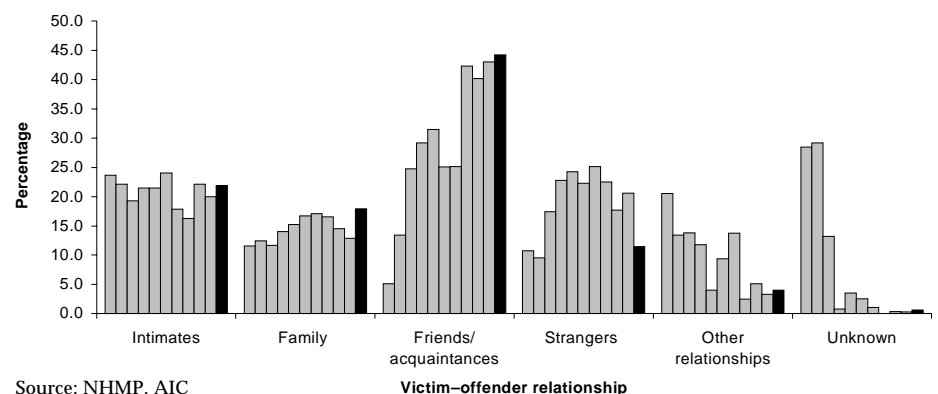
**Figure 4:** Australia, 1 July 1989 to 30 June 2000—handgun homicides as a proportion of firearm homicides\*



\* Excludes cases where the details as to the type of firearm were not available due to firearm not yet being located.

Source: NHMP, AIC

**Figure 5:** Australia, 1 July 1989 to 30 June 2000—trends in victim–offender relationships



Source: NHMP, AIC

homicide victims were of Caucasian appearance (n=269; 79.8%). Indigenous persons accounted for 13.1 per cent (n=44) of homicide victims, compared to representing only two per cent of the total Australian population. Persons of Asian appearance accounted for 4.7 per cent of homicide victims (n=16). Indigenous victims of homicide were evenly spread across New South Wales (n=13), Queensland (n=12) and Western Australia (n=12). Of the six homicides that occurred in the Northern Territory, four involved Indigenous victims. These patterns follow those recorded for previous years (see Mouzos 2000a, pp. 34–5).

### Offenders

As with the victim profile, caution should be used when interpreting data relating to the racial appearance of homicide offenders. As expected, the majority of homicide offenders were of Caucasian appearance (76.2%). However, despite Indigenous persons only accounting for a small proportion of the Australian population, they accounted for 14.5 per cent of homicide offenders. Indigenous homicide will be the subject of further examination in a forthcoming Trends and Issues paper. A further 5.2 per cent of offenders were of Asian appearance. Once again, these patterns are consistent with previous years.

### Gender and Age Distribution

Of the 337 victims of homicide recorded in 1999–2000, 202 were male (59.9%) and 134 were female (39.8%).<sup>5</sup> This is relatively consistent with previous years (1989–90 to 1998–99: 63.2% male; 36.8% female). However, a jurisdictional comparison suggests that the distribution of homicide victims by gender differs on a State-to-State basis (Table 2). For example, in Queensland and Western Australia, the victims of homicide were about equally distributed on the basis of gender,<sup>6</sup> whereas in the rest of the States (with the

exception of the ACT), males outnumbered females as victims of homicide.

Homicide victimisation varies according to gender and age. Similar to previous years, for the fiscal year 1999–2000, the highest risk of homicide victimisation for males was in the 30 to 34 year age group (rate of 4.1), followed by those in the 25 to 29 year age group (rate of 3.8) (see Figure 6). For females, the highest risk of homicide victimisation was in the 25 to 29 year age group (rate of 3.5), followed by the 20 to 24 year age group (rate of 2.8). Males and females under the age of 15

experienced relatively similar rates of victimisation, with young children being victimised at a rate of two per 100,000 relevant population. In the older age groups, the numbers reduce proportionately in all categories, with females outrating males in the 70 to 79 year age group (Figure 6).

Similar to previous years, males (n=274; 84.6%) outnumbered females as offenders of homicide (n=50; 15.4%) by a ratio of about 8 : 1. Western Australia recorded the highest homicide offending rate for females (1.29), whereas

**Table 2: Australia, States and Territories—gender of homicide victims, number and rate per 100,000 population, 1999–2000**

Jurisdiction	Gender of victims					
	Male		Female		Total victims	
	Number	Rate	Number	Rate	Number	Rate
New South Wales	72 (64.9)	2.25	39 (35.1)	1.20	111	1.72
Victoria	42 (66.7)	1.79	21 (33.3)	0.88	63	1.33
Queensland*	37 (49.3)	2.09	37 (49.3)	2.10	**75	2.12
Western Australia	23 (52.3)	2.44	21 (47.7)	2.26	44	2.35
South Australia	16 (61.5)	2.16	10 (38.5)	1.32	26	1.74
Tasmania	7 (77.8)	3.02	2 (22.2)	0.84	9	1.91
Northern Territory	4 (66.7)	3.89	2 (33.3)	2.19	6	3.09
Australian Capital Territory	1 (33.3)	0.65	2 (66.7)	1.28	3	0.97
Australia	202 (59.9)	2.13	134 (39.8)	1.40	337	1.77

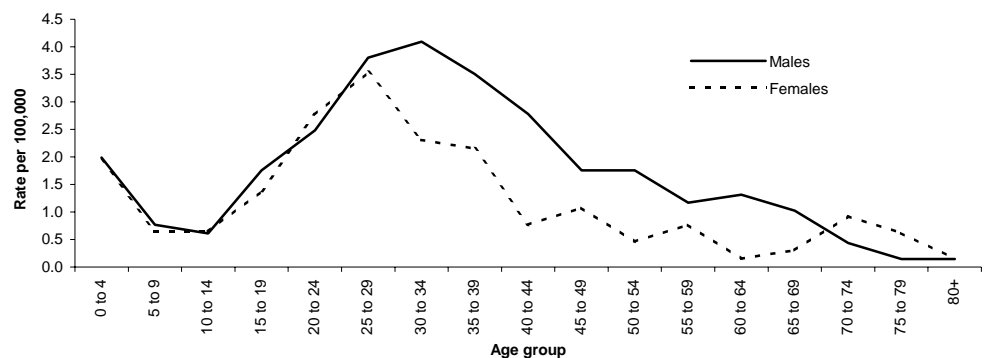
Percentages are shown in parentheses.

\* Includes the 15 victims of the fire at Childers. If the Childers victims were excluded from the tally, the homicide victimisation rate for Queensland would be 1.70.

\*\* Includes one unidentified victim of the Childers fire where gender was not recorded.

Source: NHMP, AIC

**Figure 6: Australia, 1 July 1999 to 30 June 2000—homicide victimisation by gender and age group, rate per 100,000 relevant population**



Source: NHMP, AIC

**Table 3: Australia, States and Territories—gender of homicide offenders, number and rate per 100,000 population, 1999–2000**

Jurisdiction	Gender of offenders				Total offenders	
	Male		Female			
	Number	Rate	Number	Rate	Number	Rate
New South Wales	93	2.91	15	0.46	108	1.68
Victoria	51	2.18	8	0.33	59	1.25
Queensland	62	3.51	7	0.40	69	1.95
Western Australia	25	2.65	12	1.29	37	1.98
South Australia	24	3.25	4	0.53	28	1.87
Tasmania	11	4.75	2	0.84	13	2.76
Northern Territory	5	4.86	1	1.10	6	3.09
Australian Capital Territory	3	1.94	1	0.64	4	1.29
Australia	274	2.89	50	0.52	324	1.70

Source: NHMP, AIC



Victoria recorded the lowest rate (0.33) in 1999–2000. Offending rates for males tended to be consistent across all jurisdictions, with Victoria the lowest of the States and the Northern Territory recording the highest rate of homicide offending by males (4.86; although note the small population and small number of homicides) (Table 3).

In terms of which age group is most at risk for homicide offending, the data suggest that males aged between 25 and 29 years have the highest offending rates for homicide (6.9 per 100,000). On the other hand, females aged between 20 and 24 had the highest rate of homicide offending among females in 1999–2000 (1.9 per 100,000 relevant population).

For 1999–2000, the data indicate that the youngest recorded homicide offender was 12 years old and the oldest recorded offender was 80 years old.

#### *Marital Status*

Of the 295 victims of homicide (excluding persons under the age of 15 years,  $n=42$ ), 44.1 per cent were recorded as being single at the time of the homicide incident ( $n=85$  male; 44 female). A further 18 per cent of victims were recorded as married ( $n=29$  male; 24 female), 20 per cent as living in a de facto relationship ( $n=39$  male; 20 female) and 15.6 per cent were separated or divorced ( $n=23$  male; 23 female). Two per cent of homicide victims were recorded as “widowed” ( $n=3$  male; 3 female).

Similar to victims of homicide, offenders showed marked differences in marital status when gender was examined. For example, male homicide offenders were more likely to be single at the time of the incident (56.2%), whereas female homicide offenders were more likely to be married or living in a de facto relationship (60%).

#### *Employment Status*<sup>7</sup>

As with previous years, the majority of homicides that were recorded in 1999–2000 involved

victims who were not working at the time of the incident (56.6%). About 38 per cent of the victims were recorded as working, with male victims more likely to have been employed at the time of the incident than female victims (73 per cent and 27 per cent, respectively, of victims employed).

Unlike whether victims or offenders are single or married, gender has no bearing on whether the offender will or will not most likely be working. Most research will show that homicide occurs predominantly amongst persons described as in the “lower” or “under-class” of society. Some argue that this is due to the unavailability of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms for such persons (Black 1998).

Regardless of the reasons, homicide offenders during the 1999–2000 period were more likely to be not working at the time of the homicide (71.3% or  $n=221$ ). Only 28.8 per cent of offenders were recorded as working during the same period. Again, these proportions are only based on offenders aged 15 years and over, and they exclude those offenders who were in correctional institutions at the time of the incident ( $n=12$ ).

### **Precipitating Factors**

#### *Alcohol and/or Illicit/Prescription Drug Use*

Between 1 July 1999 and 30 June 2000, 33.3 per cent of victims ( $n=114$ ) were recorded as having consumed alcohol at the time of the offence. In one particular case the victim had a recorded blood-alcohol level of 0.356 per cent (or 356mg/100ml), indicating that they were severely inebriated at the time of death.

In addition, in 24.3 per cent ( $n=82$ ) of homicide victims there was also an indication that they were under the influence of illicit drugs at the time of the incident. Of the 114 victims who had consumed alcohol, 35 per cent ( $n=40$ ) of the victims had

consumed both alcohol and illicit drugs, with cannabis being the most common drug accompanying alcohol consumption ( $n=21$ ).

Male victims were more likely than female victims to be under the influence of alcohol at the time of the incident (80 out of 202 male victims and 34 out of 134 female victims). However, of those female victims who were under the influence of illicit drugs ( $n=25$ ), cannabis was the most common drug that they had taken ( $n=11$ ).

For the period 1 July 1999 to 30 June 2000, 40 per cent of homicide offenders were recorded as being under the influence of alcohol at the time of the incident (109 male; 21 female). About 15 per cent ( $n=48$ ) of offenders were under the influence of illicit drugs, with the most common drug of use being cannabis ( $n=25$  or 52.1%).

#### *Alleged Motive for the Killing*

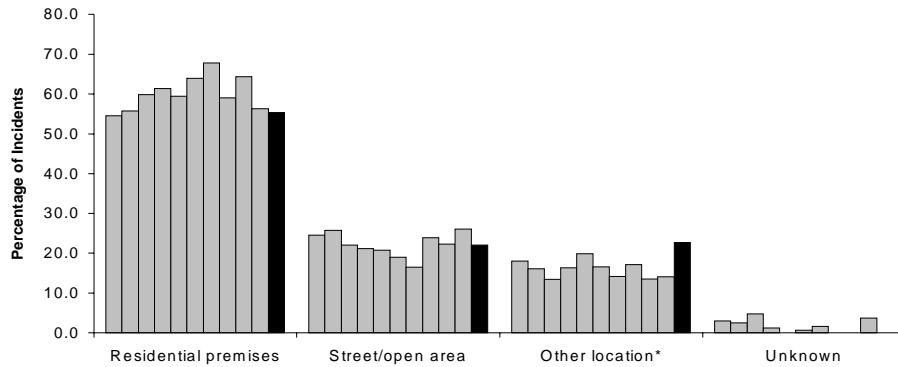
Although we can categorise alleged motives for killing, it is important to keep in mind that the reasons behind a killing are often complex. In some cases it is a combination of factors that give someone the final “push” to fulfil the act.

In Australia and elsewhere, the reasons behind a male being killed differ to those where a female is killed (Silverman & Kennedy 1993; Polk 1994; Mouzos 1999, 2000a). Almost half of all male victims ( $n=94$ ) were killed as a result of some type of argument, usually precipitated by alcohol consumption (includes arguments over money or drugs). In contrast, almost half of all female victims ( $n=62$ ) were killed as a result of a domestic altercation, jealousy or termination of a relationship. For 55 victims, the alleged motive was not known at the time of data collection.

#### *Homicide in the Course of Other Crime*

The incidence of homicide in the course of other crime has remained stable over the years. Between 1 July 1999 and 30 June 2000, there were 35 (11.7%)

**Figure 7: Australia, 1 July 1989 to 30 June 2000—distribution of homicide incidents by location**



\* "Other location" includes shops, shopping malls, banks/credit unions/post offices, car parks/public garages/service stations, workplace/schools, and other commercial premises, and public transport and related facilities, places of entertainment, and corrective/health institutions.

Source: NHMP, AIC

homicide incidents that occurred in the commission of another crime. Just under half of these incidents followed a robbery, break-and-enter or theft (n=16). A further 11 incidents followed a sexual assault or a kidnapping/abduction, and four incidents occurred as a result of arson.

#### Location of the Incident

Over the years the majority of homicide incidents have occurred in residential premises (Mouzos 2000a). The latest year is no exception. Of the 300 homicide incidents that occurred in 1999–2000, 55.3 per cent (n=166) occurred in a residence (Figure 7). A further 22 per cent of incidents occurred on a street, road/highway or open area/waterway. Note the increase in homicide incidents occurring in some other location (23.7%) in 1999–2000. This includes incidents recorded as occurring in a private motor vehicle (10%) and recreational/food venue (3%).

#### Concluding Comments

This report provides a statistical "snapshot" of homicide in Australia during the period 1 July 1999 to 30 June 2000. Australia recorded 337 victims of homicide during 1999–2000, a decrease of four victims compared to 1998–99, despite the 15 victims of the Childers fire. Most basic patterns and trends of homicide during this period remained similar to those observed in previous years.

#### Notes

- 1 Based on the Australian population as at December 1999 (ABS 2000b).
- 2 These homicides resulted in multiple fatalities: the Port Arthur incident resulted in the death of 35 victims in April 1996 in Tasmania; the Strathfield incident took place in August 1991 in New South Wales and resulted in seven fatalities; the Central Coast incident occurred in Queensland in 1992–93 with five victims; and, more recently, the Snowtown murders in Adelaide in 1999 claimed a total of 11 victims.
- 3 Excludes six cases where the firearm had yet to be located.
- 4 Total number of identified offenders who used a firearm is 44 (excludes six cases where the firearm was not located, and details as to type of firearm cannot be verified).
- 5 Excludes one victim where gender was not recorded.
- 6 This gender balance still remains even if the victims of the Childers fire are excluded.
- 7 Excludes persons aged less than 15, persons in corrective institutions and unknown cases (n=63).

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