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Abstract | This study examines the characteristics of parricide in Australia using 35 years of data from the National Homicide Monitoring Program.

Parricide, or the homicide of a parent by their child, comprises five percent of homicides each year. Offenders were predominantly male but victimisation was more even. Parricide was largely gendered, with sons more likely to kill their fathers and daughters to kill their mothers. Offenders aged 10–17 years committed parricide at higher rates than older homicide offenders and almost a fifth of parricide offenders were delusional at the time of the homicide.

Findings illustrate the distinctiveness of parricide and the greater need to consider this form of lethal violence in responses to family violence.

Parricide in Australia: Findings from the National Homicide Monitoring Program

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Parricide, or the murder or manslaughter of a parent by their child, is a relatively rare event, comprising between two and four percent of homicides globally (Bourget, Gagné & Labelle 2007; Heide & Petee 2007a; Hillbrand et al. 1999; Holt 2017). Despite its rarity, parricide is unique in form as well as in its stable prevalence as other homicide has declined. The formative work of Heide and colleagues (Fegadel & Heide 2017; Heide 1992, 2013; Heide & Petee 2007a), followed by Bojanić et al. (2020), Bourget, Gagné and Labelle (2007), Hillbrand et al. (1999), Holt (2017), Miles, Condry and Windsor (2023) and Marleau, Auclair and Millaud (2006) among others, has illustrated the distinctiveness of parricide. For example, parricide is characterised by similar proportions of male and female victims, unlike other homicide types (Bojanić et al. 2020; Bourget, Gagné & Labelle 2007; Heide & Petee 2007a; Holt 2017; Miles, Condry & Windsor 2023); the preponderance of younger male and female perpetrators (Heide & Petee 2007a); and the severity of the violence (ie 'overkill') and age-specific motivations of offenders (Bojanić et al. 2020; Bourget, Gagné & Labelle 2007; Heide 2013, 1992; Heide & Petee 2007a; Miles, Condry & Windsor 2023; Marleau, Auclair & Millard 2006; Myers & Vo 2012).

Most of the literature has concentrated on the classification and prevalence of offender typologies, differentiated by histories of childhood abuse, mood and psychiatric disorders, and emotional dysregulation in the form of intense rage (Bojanić et al. 2020; Bourget, Gagné & Labelle 2007; Heide 2013, 1992; Hillbrand et al. 1999; Myers & Vo 2012; but see Holt 2017). Similarly, there has been almost singular attention on the differences between adolescent- and adult-perpetrated parricide, related to personal histories of family violence and mental illness and the target and method of killing (Heide & Petee 2007a, 2007b; Hillbrand et al. 1999; Holt 2017; Marleau, Auclair & Millaud 2006; Myers & Vo 2012).

In Australia, much of the response to domestic homicide is focused on intimate partner homicide and, to a lesser extent, filicide. Recent attention on child–parent violence, specifically adolescent-perpetrated family violence (Boxall & Sabol 2021; Fitz-Gibbon et al. 2022; Peck, Hutchinson & Provost 2021), and the extent of elder abuse (see Qu et al. 2023 for comprehensive study on prevalence in Australia) has fostered wider awareness of the scope of family violence. Nonetheless, parricide has largely been absent from this discourse, except for the occasional report in the media (see, for example, Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2023, 2015; Menagh 2021).

In this study, we examine the frequency and characteristics of parricide in Australia. As one of the few parricide studies using long-term population data, it describes victim and offender dynamics defined by age and sex and the circumstances of the homicide event.

Method

This study uses data from the Australian Institute of Criminology’s National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP). The NHMP holds data on all homicide incidents, victims and offenders recorded by state and territory police since 1989–90. The data collated annually by the NHMP are drawn from homicide offence records provided by police services and coronial records accessed from the National Coronial Information System. *Homicide* as defined in the NHMP includes:

- all cases resulting in a person or persons being charged with murder or manslaughter;
- all murder–suicides classed as murder by police;
- all driving causing death offences where the offender was charged with murder, manslaughter or equivalent offences; and
- all other deaths classed as homicides by police, whether or not the offender was apprehended.

We examined incidents of parricide over a 35-year period from 1989–90 to 2023–24. Parricides were identified where the closest relationship between the victim and offender was a parent and their child. A parent includes a biological parent, step-parent, foster parent or other culturally defined parental relationship. A child offender includes any offender aged 10 years and over who was the son or daughter of the victim.

Parricides comprise both single-victim incidents (one parent killed) and double-victim incidents (both parents killed). Homicides where a parent (or parents) and a non-parental victim were killed in the same incident were also classified as a parricide, as the closest relationship between victim and offender was parent and child.

Only parricides from cleared homicide incidents were included in the analysis, because only for these incidents can the offender's relationship with the victim be ascertained. For the purposes of the NHMP, a cleared homicide incident is one where an offender was charged with a homicide offence (murder, manslaughter or equivalent), the offender died prior to arrest but would have been charged with a homicide offence or the incident was cleared otherwise (for example, by legal intervention).

Definitions

We use different phrases in this study to identify parricide victims and offenders. A victim may be identified by their sex (see below) or their parental relationship (ie father or mother). Similarly, an offender may be identified by their sex or their relationship with the victim (ie son or daughter). The parricide of fathers and mothers may also be referred to as a patricide and matricide respectively.

Sex is collected by the NHMP in accordance with the Australian Bureau of Statistics standard (ABS 2021) and is defined based on the individual's sex recorded at birth. Sex rather than gender is used in the NHMP to ensure consistency with historical data, as gender was not necessarily uniformly collected in police and coronial records. Further, sex is retained in the NHMP as it is 'an important indicator for statistical analysis in births and deaths ...' (ABS 2021: np).

Indigenous status is collected in accordance with the ABS Indigenous status standard (ABS 2014), although there may be variation in how these data are recorded by state and territory police. Indigenous status data are cross-referenced between police and coronial data and reported in the NHMP as 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' (or Indigenous) and 'Non-Indigenous'. A victim or offender's Indigenous status is recorded as 'Not stated/unknown' if information is not available from police or coronial data or the Indigenous status provided does not match between these records.

Findings

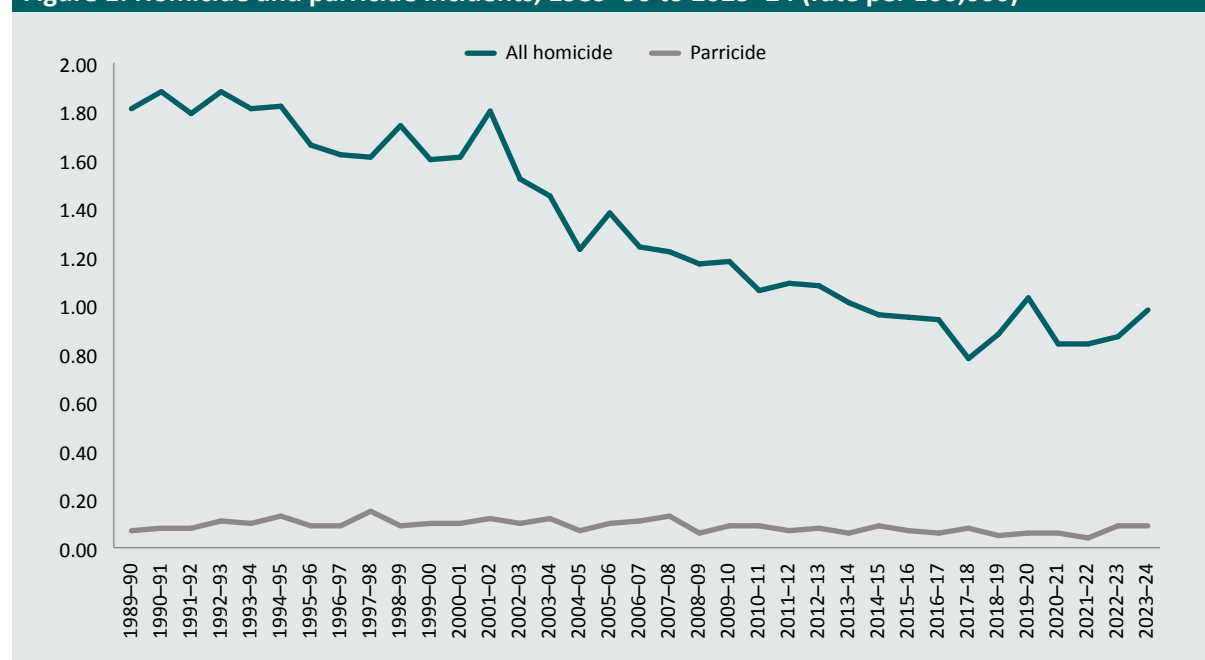
Parricide is a rare but persistent homicide in Australia. Each year between 1989–90 and 2023–24, an average of 12 parricides were recorded across Australia (range: 7–18), totalling 429 incidents over these 35 years. Proportionally, most parricides, like homicide generally, occurred in the more populous jurisdictions (see Table 1). New South Wales recorded a third of parricides (34%, $n=145$) and Victoria (20%, $n=84$) and Queensland (19%, $n=82$) recorded a fifth each.

	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	Total
Number	145	84	82	48	39	13	7	11	429
Percent	33.8	19.6	19.1	11.2	9.1	3.0	1.6	2.6	100.0
Percent all homicide	4.8	4.3	4.3	4.3	5.4	6.1	7.8	2.3	4.5

Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2023–24 [computer file]

Parricides accounted for five percent of homicides since 1989–90 at an overall population rate of 0.09 per 100,000. While the homicide rate declined in Australia between 1989–90 and 2023–24 (see Miles & Bricknell 2025), the parricide rate has remained constant (see Figure 1). As a proportion of domestic homicide, it has shown slightly more variation. Parricide comprises 12 percent of domestic homicides overall but the annual proportion has ranged from six to 21 percent.

Figure 1: Homicide and parricide incidents, 1989–90 to 2023–24 (rate per 100,000)



Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2023–24 [computer file]

Most parricides were single parricides, or the homicide of one parent. Around nine in 10 parricides (93%, $n=400$) were single parricides and around one in 10 (7%, $n=29$) were double parricides (or the homicide of both parents; see Table 2). The incidence of double parricide in Australia is twice the rate recorded in England and Wales (Holt 2017) but similar to the incidence in the United States (Heide & Petee 2007a). Non-parental victims were killed in a small number of single and double parricides—14 of the single parricides (or three percent of all parricides) and four of the double parricides (or one percent of all parricides) involved parental and non-parental victims. In all but two of these incidents, the other victims were family members, usually the offender’s sibling ($n=8$).

Table 2: Incidents of single and double parricide, 1989–90 to 2023–24

	<i>n</i>	%
Single parricide	400	93.2
Parent only	386	90.0
Parent and non-parental victim	14	3.3
Double parricide	29	6.8
Parents only	25	5.8
Parents and non-parental victim	4	0.9
Total	429	100.0

Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2023–24 [computer file]

Parricide victims

Parricide has been described as ‘distinct’ from domestic homicide and homicide overall because of the relatively even distribution of male and female victimisation (Holt 2017). This symmetry is also seen in the parricides described in this study. In total, 458 parents were killed in the 429 parricides between 1989–90 and 2023–24 (see Table 3). Fifty-four percent ($n=246$) of the victims were fathers and 46 percent ($n=212$) were mothers. This diverges from all homicide in Australia, where a much larger proportion of victims is male (65% ($n=6,583$) males vs 35% ($n=3,587$) females; Miles & Bricknell 2025) and intimate partner homicide, where a much larger proportion of victims is female (76% ($n=1,715$) females vs 24% ($n=534$) males).

Rates of victimisation were similarly equal. Overall, the patricide rate was 0.10 per 100,000 male population aged 25 years and over (range: 0.06–0.22 per 100,000), slightly higher than the matricide rate of 0.08 per 100,000 female population aged 25 years and over (range: 0.04–0.14 per 100,000).

Most fathers were killed in a single parricide (88%, $n=217$; see Table 3), as were the majority of mothers (86%, $n=183$). Twenty-nine fathers (12% of all male parricide victims) and 29 mothers (14% of all female parricide victims) were killed together in a double parricide. Few victims of single ($n=14$) and double parricides ($n=8$) were killed with a non-parental victim. A total of 20 non-parental victims were killed alongside the offender’s parent(s).

International studies describe a wide age range for victims of parricide but on average fathers tend to be younger (in their 50s) than mothers (in their 70s). The age range of Australian parricide victims was similarly broad, spanning 28 to 92 years. Mothers tended to be older than fathers at the time of the homicide, although the age difference was not as pronounced in Australia (see Figure 2). The average age of male victims was 59.8 years, similar to the average age of 60.6 years for female victims. Over half of fathers (54%, $n=133$) were aged 45–64 years, whereas almost half of mothers were between 55 and 74 years (47%, $n=99$). Almost a fifth of mothers (16%, $n=34$) were between 75 and 84 years of age, nearly double the proportion of fathers in the same age group (9%, $n=21$).

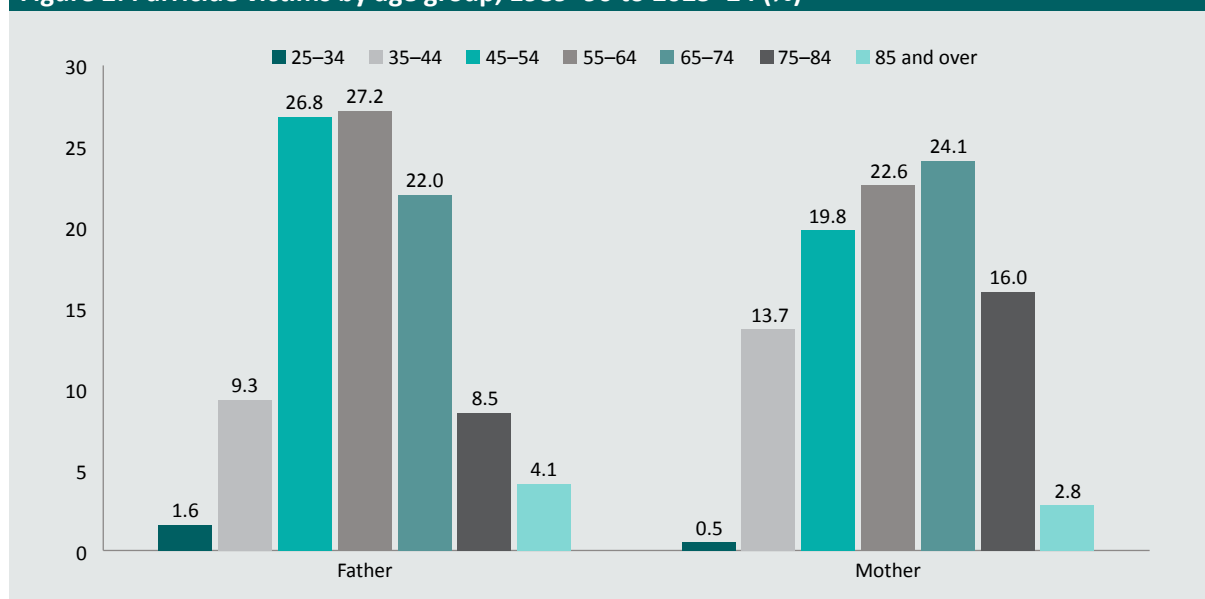
Table 3: Victims of single and double parricide, 1989–90 to 2023–24					
	Father		Mother		Total
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Single parricide	217	88.2	183	86.3	400
Sole victim	212	86.2	174	82.1	386
With other, non-parental victims	5	2.0	9	4.2	14
Double parricide	29	11.8	29	13.7	58
Sole victims	25	10.2	25	11.8	50
With other, non-parental victims	4	1.6	4	1.9	8
Total	246	53.7^a	212	46.3^a	458

a: Percent of all parricide victims

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2023–24 [computer file]

Figure 2: Parricide victims by age group, 1989–90 to 2023–24 (%)

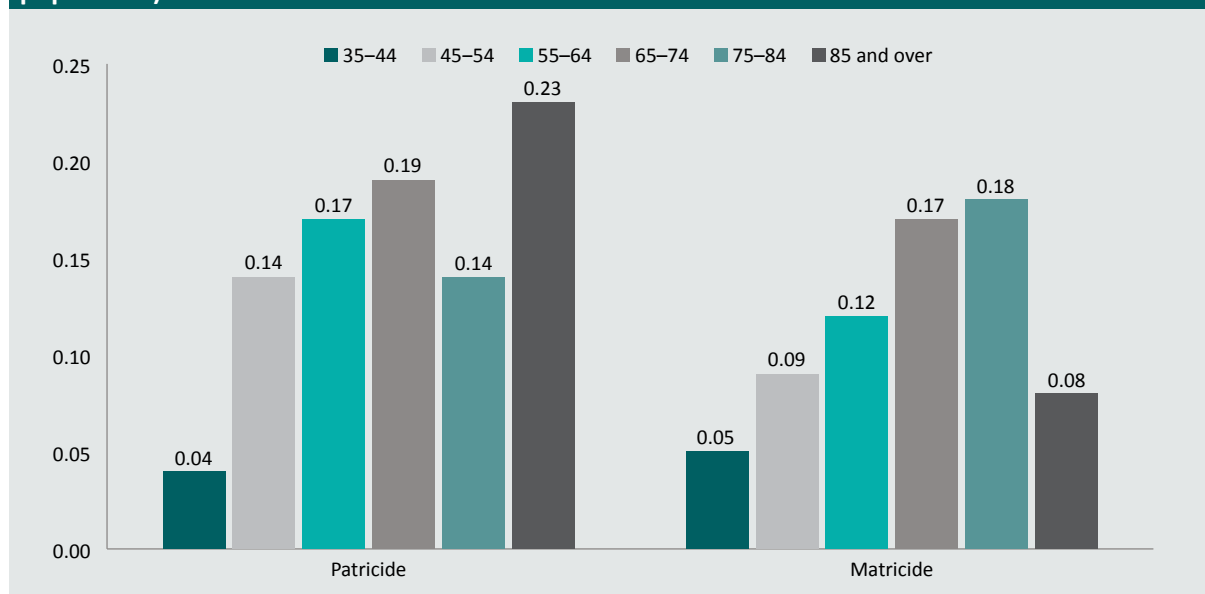


Note: Excludes two victims whose age was not stated or unknown

Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2023–24 [computer file]; see Table A1

Parricide rates generally increased with age. Matricide rates steadily rose to 0.18 per 100,000 female population aged 75–84 years before dropping after the age of 85 years (see Figure 3). Parricide rates also steadily increased with age but differed from matricide rates by declining among the 75–84 year age group before increasing again. The parricide rate was highest in the oldest age group, at 0.23 per 100,000 males aged 85 years and over. Parricide rates were greater than matricide rates for every age group except 35–44 years and 75–84 years (0.14 vs 0.18 per 100,000 relevant population respectively).

Figure 3: Parricide victims by age group, 1989–90 to 2023–24 (rate per 100,000 relevant population)



Note: Excludes two victims whose age was not stated or unknown

Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2023–24 [computer file]

Parricide was less common among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people compared with their overall rate of homicide victimisation. Eight percent of parricide victims between 1989–90 and 2023–24 were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons ($n=37$; see Table 4), lower than the 14 percent of all homicide victims over the same period ($n=1,407$; see Miles & Bricknell 2025). A larger proportion of Indigenous parricide victims were male (60%, $n=22$) compared with the general parricide pattern but equivalent to the proportion of males among all Indigenous homicide victims (61%, $n=854$; see Miles & Bricknell 2025).

Non-Indigenous parents comprised 92 percent of parricide victims ($n=419$) and the sex distribution was more even—53 percent were male ($n=223$) and 47 percent were female ($n=196$). Non-Indigenous males were less frequently the victim of a parricide than a homicide overall (53% vs 65%, $n=5,644$) while the reverse was true for non-Indigenous females (47% vs 35%, $n=2,992$).

	<i>n</i>	%	% all victims
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander father	22	59.5	4.8
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mother	15	40.5	3.3
<i>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parent</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>8.1</i>
Non-Indigenous father	223	53.2	48.7
Non-Indigenous mother	196	46.8	42.8
<i>Non-Indigenous parent</i>	<i>419</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>91.0</i>
Parent's Indigenous status not stated or unknown	4		0.9
Total	458		100.0

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

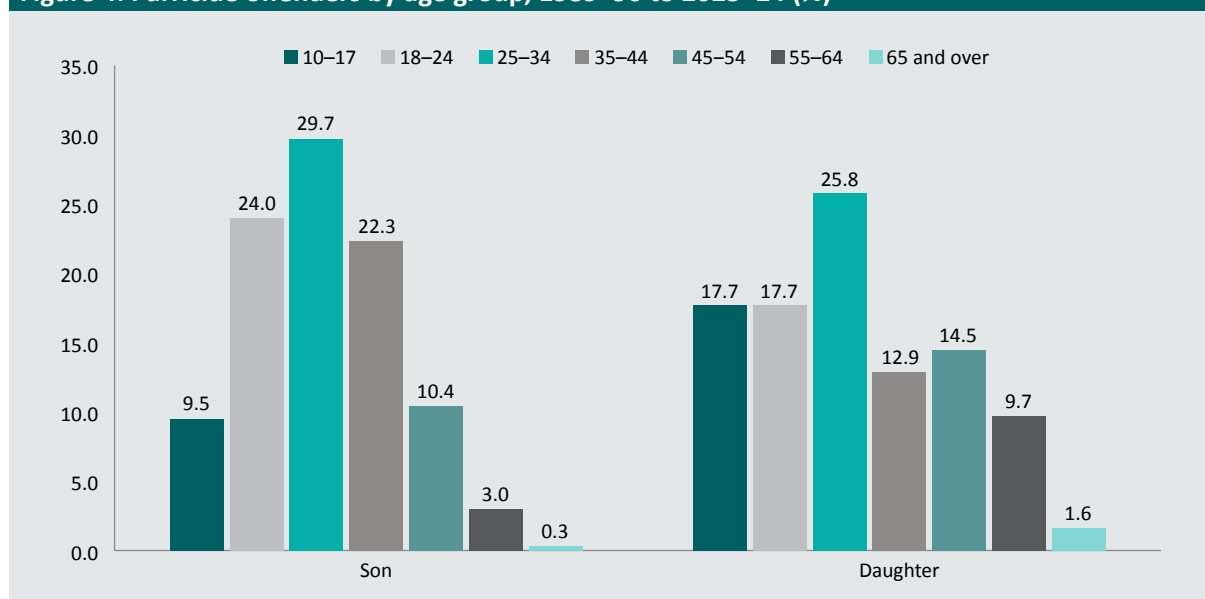
Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2023–24 [computer file]

Parricide offenders

While parricide victims are almost equally male and female, parricide offenders are predominantly male. Homicide is largely committed by males in Australia and the proportion of male parricide offenders between 1989–90 and 2023–24 (86%, $n=367$; see Miles & Bricknell 2025) corresponded with the proportion of male homicide offenders overall (87%, $n=9,435$). Fourteen percent of parricide offenders were female ($n=62$).

The age profile of sons who committed parricide resembled the age profile of male homicide offenders generally, concentrated among males aged 18 to 34 years (see Figure 4). However, one in 10 male parricide offenders was between 10 and 17 years (10%, $n=35$), double the proportion of young male offenders in the overall male homicide offender population (5%, $n=358$). The age profile of daughters who committed parricide followed a different pattern, tending to be younger than female homicide offenders generally. Almost one-fifth of female parricide offenders were aged 10–17 years (18%, $n=11$) and over a third were aged under 25 years (35%, $n=22$). By contrast, one-fifth of all female homicide offenders (22%, $n=256$) were younger than 25 years and almost a third were 25–34 years of age (30%, $n=343$).

Figure 4: Parricide offenders by age group, 1989–90 to 2023–24 (%)



Note: Excludes three male parricide offenders whose age was not stated or unknown

Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2023–24 [computer file]; see Table A2

Similar to victimisation, parricide offending was proportionally less common among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Ten percent ($n=41$) of parricide offenders were Indigenous compared with 17 percent ($n=1,812$) of all homicide offenders. Conversely, parricide offending was higher among non-Indigenous offenders—90 percent ($n=387$) of parricide offenders were non-Indigenous compared with 81 percent ($n=8,852$) of all homicide offenders.

Unlike victimisation, the sex differentiation among offenders was more even for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offenders than non-Indigenous offenders. While Indigenous and non-Indigenous males predominate parricide offending, more than double the proportion of Indigenous offenders were female (37%, $n=15$) compared with non-Indigenous parricide offenders (12%, $n=47$). This contrasts with overall Indigenous homicide offending, where females comprise 20 percent ($n=355$) of offenders, but is equivalent to the proportion of female non-Indigenous offenders (12%, $n=1,089$; see Miles & Bricknell 2025).

Most of the 429 primary parricide offenders acted alone, although daughters were slightly more likely than sons to have committed the parricide with others (8% of female-perpetrated parricide, $n=5$ vs 4% of male-perpetrated parricide, $n=14$). While the number of multiple-offender parricides was small ($n=19$), daughters were the primary offender in a quarter (26%) of these incidents, comparable to parricide offender dynamics reported for England and Wales and the United States (Heide & Petee 2007a; Holt 2017). The relationship between co-offenders is not collected in the NHMP but data on the co-offenders' relationship with the victim indicate most of the latter did not have a familial relationship with the victim. In three incidents, the co-offenders were siblings.

Offender–victim dynamics

Parricides are largely gendered, with sons primarily killing their fathers and daughters killing their mothers. In Australia, this predisposition stands, although it was much more apparent among daughters who commit parricide (see Table 5). Just under two-thirds of female parricide offenders killed their mother (63%, $n=39$), compared with just over a third who killed their father (37%, $n=23$). Male parricide offenders also tended to kill their fathers but at a lower proportion compared with female parricide offenders (53%, $n=194$). Four in 10 male parricide offenders killed their mother (39%, $n=144$).

Double parricides were solely committed by sons. Almost one in 10 (8%, $n=29$) male parricide offenders killed both their parents.

The majority of parricide offenders (excluding double-parricide offenders) killed a biological parent (91%, $n=362$). Almost all matricide offenders killed their biological mother (97%, $n=178$). Patricide offenders more commonly killed a step-parent compared with matricide offenders (15%, $n=32$ vs 3%, $n=5$). A quarter (26%, $n=6$) of daughters who committed patricide killed their stepfather, as did 13 percent of sons ($n=26$).

	Son		Daughter		Total
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Biological father	167	45.5	17	27.4	184
Stepfather	26	7.1	6	9.7	32
<i>Father</i>	194 ^a	52.9	23	37.1	217 ^a
Biological mother	140	38.1	38	61.3	178
Stepmother	4	1.1	1	1.6	5
<i>Mother</i>	144	39.2	39	62.9	183
Both parents	29	7.9	0	0.0	29
Total	367	100.0	62	100.0	429

a: Includes one other parental relationship

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2023–24 [computer file]

Similarly gendered was the age group of the offender and the parent killed. Table 6 shows that patricide was associated with younger offenders and matricide with older offenders. Two-thirds of sons (65%, $n=22$) aged 10–17 committed patricide compared with 59 percent of sons aged 18–44 ($n=151$) and 44 percent of sons aged 45 years and over ($n=20$). Over half of daughters aged 10–17 years killed their father (55%, $n=12$), dropping to 42 percent of daughters aged 18–44 ($n=15$) and less than 10 percent of daughters aged 45 years and over (7%, $n=1$).

Matricide increased with the age of the offender. Fifty-seven percent of sons aged 45 years and over ($n=26$) killed their mother compared with 41 percent of sons aged 18–44 years ($n=105$) and 35 percent of sons aged 10–17 years ($n=12$). Among daughters, the proportion of offenders aged 45 or over who killed their mother was double that of the youngest age group. Forty-six percent of daughters aged 10–17 years ($n=5$) killed their mother, increasing to 93 percent of daughters aged 45 years and over ($n=14$).

Table 6: Single parricide offenders by sex, age group and parental relationship, 1989–90 to 2023–24					
	Father		Mother		Total
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Sons					
10–17	22	64.7	12	35.3	34
18–44	151	59.0	105	41.0	256
45 and over	20	43.5	26	56.5	46
Daughters					
10–17	6	54.5	5	45.5	11
18–44	15	41.7	21	58.3	36
45 and over	1	6.7	14	93.3	15

Note: Excludes double parricide offenders ($n=29$) and two male offenders whose age was not stated or unknown. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

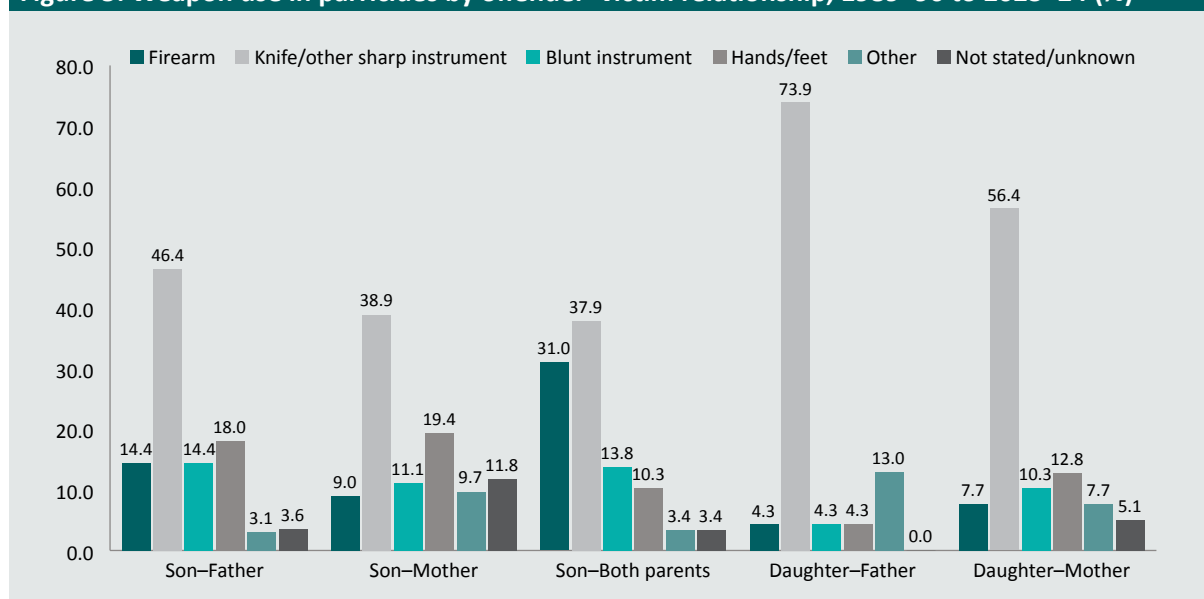
Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2023–24 [computer file]

Weapon use and cause of death

Weapon use by parricide offenders reflected the general pattern of homicide weapon use, with a predominance of knives and other sharp instruments (46%, $n=196$; see Figure 5). However, the proportion of parricides involving knife use ranged from 74 percent of patricides committed by daughters ($n=17$) to 39 percent of matricides committed by sons ($n=56$).

Sons exhibited some variation in weapon use depending on whether the victim was their father or mother. Knives were more frequently used in patricide (46%, $n=90$) than matricide (39%, $n=56$), as were firearms (14%, $n=28$ patricide vs 9%, $n=13$ matricide). However, there was comparable use of blunt instruments (14%, $n=28$ patricide vs 11%, $n=16$ matricide) or the offender's hands and feet (18%, $n=35$ patricide vs 19%, $n=28$ matricide).

Figure 5: Weapon use in parricides by offender–victim relationship, 1989–90 to 2023–24 (%)



Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2023–24 [computer file]; see Table A3

Weapon use by sons varied again if both parents were killed. While knives remained the primary weapon type (38%, $n=11$), almost a third of double parricides involved a firearm (31%, $n=9$). Indeed, firearm use in double parricides was twice the proportion used by sons in single patricide (14%, $n=28$) and more than triple the use of firearms by sons in single matricide (9%, $n=13$).

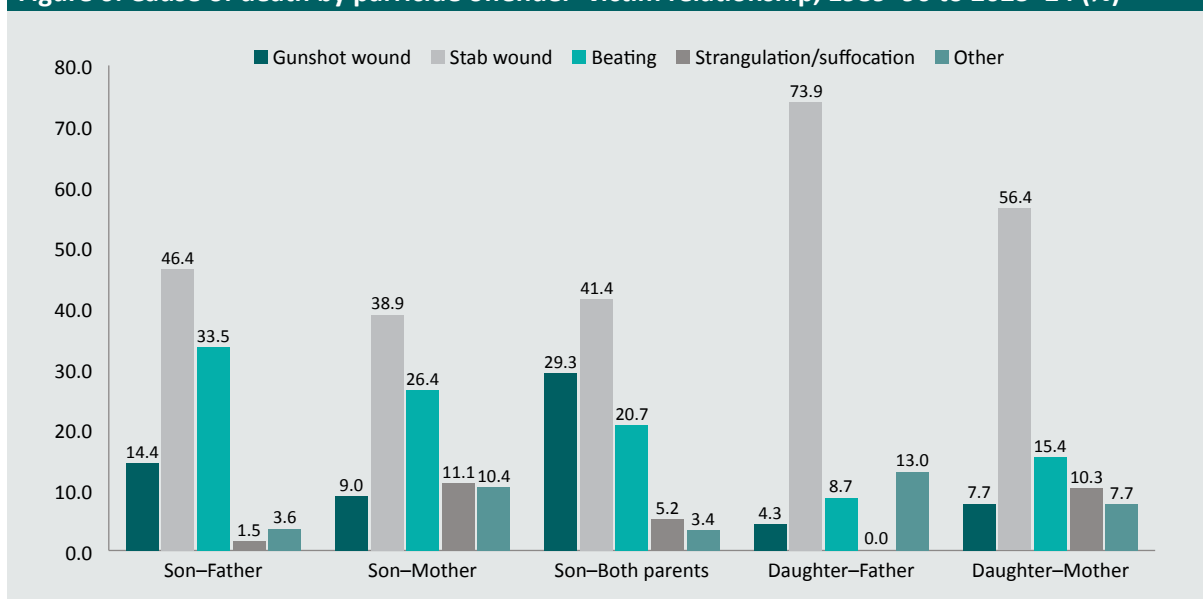
Daughters primarily used knives or other sharp instruments. Three-quarters of daughters (74%, $n=17$) who killed their father used a knife, as did over half of daughters (56%, $n=22$) who killed their mother. There was some use of blunt instruments and hands and feet if the daughter’s victim was her mother, accounting for around one in 10 matricides each (10%, $n=4$ and 13%, $n=5$ respectively).

Cause of death mirrored the pattern of weapon use, with stab wounds the leading cause of death (46%, $n=209$), particularly among parents killed by their daughter (see Figure 6). A beating or blunt force trauma was the second most common cause of death where a son was the offender. A third of fathers (34%, $n=65$) and a quarter of mothers (26%, $n=38$) killed by their son succumbed to injuries sustained during a beating or from being hit with a blunt instrument. Beating deaths were less common for parents killed by their daughters, although mothers were more likely than fathers to die from a beating inflicted by a daughter (15%, $n=6$ vs 9%, $n=2$). Gunshot wounds were the cause of death for 14 percent of victims ($n=62$), and 29 percent ($n=17$) of victims of double parricide.

Most parents killed by their son died from a stab wound, beating or gunshot wound, although proportionally these causes of death were higher for fathers. Mothers died from a larger range of other causes, primarily strangulation and suffocation, which caused the death of 11 percent of mothers killed by their sons ($n=16$).

This was also the outcome for parents killed by their daughters, with a preponderance of deaths from stab wounds, followed less frequently by beatings/blunt force injuries and gunshot wounds. Similar too was the 10 percent ($n=4$) of deaths of mothers from strangulation and suffocation.

Figure 6: Cause of death by parricide offender–victim relationship, 1989–90 to 2023–24 (%)



Note: Excludes victims whose cause of death was not stated or unknown ($n=8$)

Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2023–24 [computer file]; see Table A4

Motivations for parricide

The circumstances that precede a parricide, like any homicide, are often complex. The NHMP records homicide motive but this is based on administrative data and cannot capture the individual and historical context for the homicide. Table 7 shows the motives of sons and daughters who killed their parent(s). Almost half of parricides committed by daughters (48%, $n=30$) and over a third by sons (37%, $n=134$) were preceded by an argument of a domestic nature. This motive captures a broad spectrum of relational motivations, spanning apparently sudden violent domestic disputes to long-standing antipathy. Another 10 percent ($n=6$) of female-perpetrated and seven percent ($n=26$) of male-perpetrated parricides were preceded by an unspecified argument and around five percent each occurred in the context of alcohol use.

Disputes about money characterised seven percent ($n=27$) of parricides by sons but none by daughters. These include parricides where the son expected or anticipated his parent would assist with his financial difficulties or debts, where there were disagreements over the composition of his parent's will (or proposed changes to it) or where he killed his parent to gain access to their life insurance or assets.

Another sex difference was the mental health status of the offender at the time of the homicide. Parricides are characterised by a high prevalence of offender mental illness, particularly psychotic conditions such as schizophrenia and mainly among male offenders. Almost a fifth (17%, $n=62$) of sons who committed parricide were deemed to be delusional when they killed their parents, and where coronial and court documents were available, many were found not guilty by way of mental impairment or found guilty of the lesser charge of manslaughter. Eight percent ($n=5$) of daughters who committed parricide, or half the proportion of sons, were experiencing psychosis at the time of the homicide.

Table 7: Parricide motive by offender relationship with victim, 1989–90 to 2023–24

	Son		Daughter		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Revenge	22	6.0	4	6.5	26	6.1
Argument of a domestic nature	134	36.5	30	48.4	164	38.2
Alcohol related argument	13	3.5	3	4.8	16	3.7
Other argument	26	7.1	6	9.7	32	7.5
Money	27	7.4	0	0.0	27	6.3
Mercy killing/murder suicide	7	1.9	1	1.6	8	1.9
Apparently delusional	62	16.9	5	8.1	67	15.6
No apparent motive	33	9.0	6	9.7	49	11.4
Not stated/unknown	43	11.7	7	11.3	50	11.7
Total	367	100.0	62	100.0	429	100.0

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2023–24 [computer file]

Suicide is not as prevalent among parricide offenders as it is for intimate partner homicide and filicide offenders but higher than observed for other homicide types. Like intimate partner homicide, it is associated with male offenders. Five percent ($n=20$) of offenders died by suicide before they were arrested—five percent of sons ($n=18$) and three percent of daughters ($n=2$). Eight of these offenders died by suicide following the ‘mercy killing’ of their parent. An offender’s death by suicide followed six percent of matricides ($n=10$), three percent of patricides ($n=7$) and 10 percent of double parricides ($n=3$).

Discussion

Parricide accounts for five percent of homicides in Australia, similar to the prevalence recorded internationally. Almost all parricides were of a single parent, although the homicide of both parents was more common in Australia than in other countries where estimates exist. A small number of parents were killed with others, usually another family member, but these incidents were infrequent, at four percent of all parricides.

Males were killed at slightly higher rates than females; however, the distribution of victims by sex was relatively even. Fathers and mothers made up 54 percent and 46 percent of victims respectively. Bojanić et al. (2020), Holt (2017) and Miles, Condry and Windsor (2023) observed similar if not greater uniformity, although other studies described male to female victimisation ratios of 2:1 or larger (for example, Bows 2019; Hillbrand et al. 1999). Some of this difference may be explained by the type of data and sampling technique used by these studies (Holt 2017), with this and the three studies cited above drawn from large-scale administrative datasets. Nonetheless, the symmetry found in this study was striking. While female parricide victims represent just six percent of all female homicide victims, the risk of parricide to women aged 25 years and over in Australia is second only to that of intimate partner homicide and comparable with that of acquaintance homicide.

Parents of any age are at risk of parricide but this risk, unsurprisingly, increased with age. The average age of fathers and mothers killed in a parricide was around 60 years, similar to the average age found in other parricide research (Bojanić et al. 2020; Bourget, Gagné & Labelle 2007; Bows 2019; Heide & Petee 2007a; Holt 2017). Victimisation rates were greatest for males aged 85 years and over and females aged 75 to 84 years, but proportionally mothers tended to be older than fathers at the time of the parricide, again consistent with overseas studies. Around half of fathers were aged 45–64 years when they were killed, while around half of mothers were aged 55 to 74 years.

Parricide offending was predominated by males, as is most homicide offending. The age profile of male parricide offenders resembled the overall male homicide offender age profile too, with the largest proportion of offenders aged between 18 and 34 years of age. One in 10 male parricide offenders, however, was aged 10–17 years—double the proportion of young male offenders when considering all homicide. Female parricide offenders tended to be younger than male parricide offenders as well as all female homicide offenders. One-fifth of female parricide offenders were 10–17 years of age and over a third were under 25 years when they committed the parricide. Daughters also tended to co-offend more than sons but not to the extent reported elsewhere (eg Heide 2013; Heide & Petee 2007a; Holt 2017) and the number of incidents was small.

The relationship between the parental victim and child offender was largely gendered. This was particularly apparent for female-perpetrated parricide, as almost two-thirds of daughters committed matricide. Just over half of sons committed patricide. Around four in 10 male and female offenders killed a parent of the opposite sex. Offender age was associated with the gender of the parent killed. Younger sons and daughters were more likely to have killed their father and, conversely, older sons and daughters to have killed their mother. Double parricide was exclusively committed by sons acting alone.

The methods of killing resembled those of homicide generally but with some differences. Weapon choice in parricide has been explained by the ‘physical strength hypothesis’ (Heide 1992; Heide & Petee 2007b), which surmises that offenders choose weapons according to the physical size and strength of the victim. This has aligned with observations from the United States of the greater use of firearms by young offenders and offenders who kill their fathers (Heide & Petee 2007a, 2007b) but has not been replicated in other jurisdictions where firearms are far less available (Bojanić et al. 2020; Bourget, Gagné & Labelle 2007; Bows 2019; Holt 2017; Miles, Condry & Windsor 2023). Knives and other sharp instruments were the primary weapon used by parricide offenders in these studies, irrespective of differences in sex and age between victim and offender. The picture is different again in Australia although closer to the latter scenario. Firearm use was proportional to or lower than firearm homicide more generally (see Miles & Bricknell 2025) except for double parricide, where almost a third involved a firearm. Knives and other sharp instruments were the most frequently used parricidal weapon but their prevalence varied depending on the relationship between victim and offender. Females primarily used knives, particularly if the victim was her father. Males also largely used knives but used blunt instruments and hands and feet more frequently compared with female offenders. Holt (2017) has considered the circumstances which enable the use of less controlling weapons, such as knives, particularly where there is a size and strength difference between victim and offender. These parricides may occur when the victim has reduced capacity to defend themselves, such as when they are asleep, immobile or intoxicated.

The association between parricide and offender mental illness is emphasised in the literature, with a high prevalence of delusional, affective and personality disorders, especially among male offenders. This study did not analyse mental health histories of offenders, in part due to the incomplete availability of coronial and court records needed to create a representative sample. Motive, while an imperfect indicator, provides some suggestion that Australian parricide offenders may be similarly affected by mental illness. Almost one in five offenders were ‘apparently delusional’ at the time of the homicide, a rate comparable to that found in overseas research. Most of these offenders were sons.

Arguments preceded the largest proportion of parricides by both sons and daughters, but the nature of the data obscures the context and measure of these disputes. This obscurity also applies to the six percent of parricides motivated by revenge. Just under one in 10 parricides committed by sons, however, were preceded by disputes about money or committed for financial gain.

In their examination of parricide, Miles, Condry and Windsor (2023: 96–97) concluded:

... the killings of mothers and fathers, and parricides by sons versus daughters, may represent distinct phenomena and should be disaggregated in parricide research to fully understand how the contexts and pathways surrounding fatal violence towards parents intersects with gender.

The findings from this study support this observation. Parricide is in itself a distinct form of homicide and the characteristics of male- and female-perpetrated patricides and matricides described here suggest distinct historical and environmental antecedents. It is also a distinct form of homicide in the context of family violence and one where risk is possibly less recognised or less countered. While this study did not explore the broader circumstances of these homicides, overseas research has noted the prevalence of ‘parental proximity and burden of responsibility’ in many parricide cases (Miles, Condry & Windsor 2023), specifically where parents are living with or supporting mentally unwell or violent children with minimal assistance from external parties. These conditions almost certainly characterise a substantial number of parricides included in this study, including those where parents had not sought or had not received consistent mental health and other support for their child and/or those where their child had discontinued or were not responsive to treatment. Yet Holt (2017: 582) has cautioned against parricide being ‘exceptionalized as a rare event presumed to be caused by psychopathological factors’ as it may conceal gender, age and family-specific dynamics that precede parricide, particularly those incidents where abuse and violence are present. Parricide remains a relatively rare occurrence in Australia but an occurrence that has nonetheless remained stable. There is greater need to consider this form of lethal violence in responses to family violence and the circumstances where non-fatal violence directed towards a parent ultimately crosses over to homicide.

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Appendix tables

Table A1: Parricide victims by age group, 1989–90 to 2023–24				
	Father		Mother	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
25–34	4	1.6	1	0.5
35–44	23	9.3	29	13.7
45–54	66	26.8	42	19.8
55–64	67	27.2	48	22.6
65–74	54	22.0	51	24.1
75–84	21	8.5	34	16.0
85 and over	10	4.1	6	2.8
Not stated	1	0.4	1	0.5
Total	246	100.00	212	100.00

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2023–24 [computer file]

Table A2: Parricide offenders by age group, 1989–90 to 2023–24				
	Son		Daughter	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
10–17	35	9.5	11	17.7
18–24	88	24.0	11	17.7
25–34	109	29.7	16	25.8
35–44	82	22.3	8	12.9
45–54	38	10.4	9	14.5
55–64	11	3.0	6	9.7
65 and over	1	0.3	1	1.6
Not stated/unknown	3	0.8	0	0.0
Total	367	100.00	62	100.00

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2023–24 [computer file]

Table A3: Weapon use by victim–offender relationship, 1989–90 to 2023–24

	Son– Father	Son– Mother	Son–Both parents	Daughter– Father	Daughter– Mother	Total
Number						
Firearm	28	13	9	1	3	54
Knife/other sharp instrument	90	56	11	17	22	196
Blunt instrument	28	16	4	1	4	53
Hands/feet	35	28	3	1	5	72
Other	6	14	1	3	3	27
Not stated/unknown	7	17	1	0	2	27
Total	194	144	29	23	39	429
Percent						
Firearm	14.4	9.0	31.0	4.3	7.7	12.6
Knife/other sharp instrument	46.4	38.9	37.9	73.9	56.4	45.7
Blunt instrument	14.4	11.1	13.8	4.3	10.3	12.4
Hands/feet	18.0	19.4	10.3	4.3	12.8	16.8
Other	3.1	9.7	3.4	13.0	7.7	6.3
Not stated/unknown	3.6	11.8	3.4	0.0	5.1	6.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2023–24 [computer file]

Table A4: Cause of death by victim–offender relationship, 1989–90 to 2023–24						
	Son– Father	Son– Mother	Son–Both parents	Daughter– Father	Daughter– Mother	Total
Number						
Gunshot wound	28	13	17	1	3	62
Stab wound	90	56	24	17	22	209
Beating or blunt force trauma	65	38	12	2	6	123
Strangulation/suffocation	3	16	3	0	4	26
Other	7	15	2	3	3	30
Not stated/unknown ^a	1	6	0	0	1	8
Total	194	144	58	23	39	458
Percent						
Firearm	14.4	9.0	29.3	4.3	7.7	13.5
Knife/other sharp instrument	46.4	38.9	41.4	73.9	56.4	45.6
Blunt instrument	33.5	26.4	20.7	8.7	15.4	26.9
Hands/feet	1.5	11.1	5.2	0.0	10.3	5.7
Other	3.6	10.4	3.4	13.0	7.7	6.6
Not stated/unknown ^a	0.5	4.2	0.0	0.0	2.6	1.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

a: Includes cause of death that could not be ascertained at autopsy

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2023–24 [computer file]

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