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Domestic/family homicide in Australia

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In 2003, the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) published a report that drew attention to the characteristics of domestic/family homicide based on the differing family relationships between victims and offenders (Mouzos & Rushforth 2003). Over the 13 years of data examined for that report (ie 1 July 1989 to 30 June 2002), there were, on average, 129 domestic/family homicide victims each year (between 32 and 47 percent of all homicides annually).

In 2001–02, the overall homicide rate was 1.8 per 100,000 population. Since then, the homicide rate has declined (1.1 per 100,000 in 2011–12), with a decrease in the number of homicides recorded across all relationship categories. The proportion of homicides that occurred between family members was 38 percent in 2011–12 (range 32%–53%, annually over the last ten years) with an average of 101 deaths in each of the preceding ten years.

This report presents data for the period 1 July 2002 through 30 June 2012 and provides an update to Mouzos and Rushforth (2003) and supplementary data to that disseminated in the AIC's latest National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP) report covering the years 2010–12 (Bryant & Cussen 2015).

Domestic/family homicides – categorising incidents by relationship

The data described in this paper are drawn from the AIC's NHMP which includes data collected from all state and territory police services regarding murders and manslaughters in each jurisdiction (excluding culpable driving causing death), as well as information collected from the National Coronial Information System (NCIS).

Within the NHMP, domestic/family homicides are sub-classified against five relationship categories. These are:

- 1) Intimate partner – victim and offender are current or former partners (married, defacto, boy/girlfriend);
- 2) Filicide – victim is the child of the offender;
- 3) Parricide – victim is the parent of the offender;
- 4) Sibicide – victim and offender are brother/s or sister/s; and
- 5) Other family – including nieces, uncles, cousins, grandparents.

Categories two through four include biological, adoptive and step relatives.

Each incident may involve more than one victim and/or offender. For incidents involving multiple victims/offenders the closest relationship between any pairing is used to categorise the incident into the hierarchical order noted above. For example, if a person is murdered by their child and nephew, the homicide would be categorised as a parricide.

Prevalence of domestic/family homicides and selected characteristics

Of the 2,631 homicide incidents documented within the NHMP dataset over the ten-year period to 30 June 2012, 1,088 (41%) were classified as domestic/family homicides and involved 1,158 victims and 1,184 offenders (see Table 1).

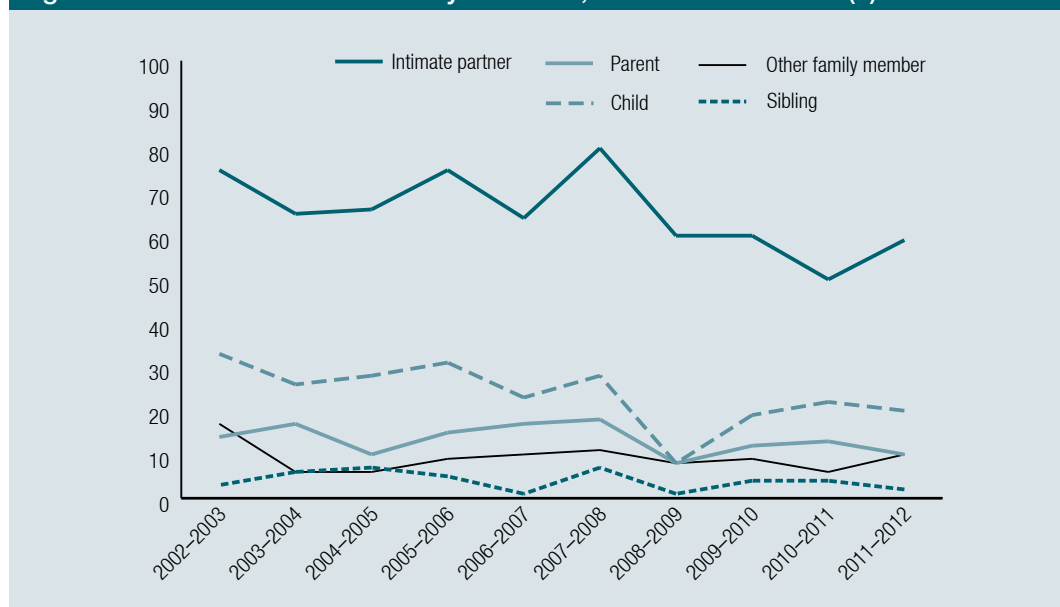
Table 1: Prevalence of domestic/family homicides by incident, victim and offender number, 2002–03 to 2011–12 (n)

Relationship category	Incidents	Victims	Offenders
Intimate partner	654	654	704
Filicide	186	238	209
Parricide	128	134	132
Siblicide	37	40	40
Other family	83	92	99
Total	1,088	1,158	1,184

Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2011–12 [computer file]

Intimate partners accounted for 23 percent of *all* homicide victims recorded within the NHMP since 1 July 2003. These victims represented the majority (n=654; 56%) of victims of domestic/family homicides. Children comprised the second most frequent group of victims of domestic/family homicides (n=238; 21%), followed by parents (n=134; 12%), siblings (n=40; 3%) and other family members (who, as an aggregate, accounted for eight percent (n=92) of victims but across several family relationships). The number of victims within each relationship category has declined since 2002–03 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Victims of domestic/family homicide, 2002–03 to 2011–12 (n)



Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2011–12 [computer file]

On the surface, there was little to distinguish a domestic/family homicide event from other homicides or between the different domestic/family relationship homicides. An examination of general incident characteristics (see Table 2) indicated that:

- The victim's home was the most frequently recorded incident location for homicides regardless of relationship category, although the proportion of domestic/family homicides (range 54%–88%) occurring within a home was greater than for non-domestic/family homicides (33%).
- All homicides were more likely to occur in the evening from six pm to before midnight with the exception of filicides which were more likely to occur in the afternoon from noon to six pm.

In general, males were more likely than females to be both homicide victims and offenders; a finding that has been consistent since the NHMP commenced in 1989. Where females were involved in a homicide, they were more likely to be the victim or offender in a domestic/family, as opposed to non-domestic/family, homicide.

- The majority (60%; n=690) of victims of domestic/family homicides overall were female, although the proportion of victims that were female varied by relationship category (see Table 3).
 - Females were typically the victims in intimate partner homicides (n=488; 75%) Males were more likely to be the victims in filicides (56% *cf* 44%) and parricides (54% *cf* 46%) and were far more likely to be victims of siblicides (80% *cf* 20%) or homicides involving other family relationships (70% *cf* 30%).
- Males accounted for the majority of offenders in both domestic/family and non-domestic/family homicides, except filicides where females accounted for over half (52%; n=96) of offenders for this category of domestic/family homicide. Females were the offender in 23 percent (n=151) of intimate partner homicides (see Table 4).

A consistent finding across 23 years of homicide monitoring by the AIC has been that stab wounds most frequently caused the injuries that led to death. In this analysis, both victims of domestic/family (n=447; 38%) and non-domestic/family homicides (n=551; 34%) were more likely to die as a result of stab wounds (see Table 3). Weapons of any kind were less likely to be used in filicide deaths, whose victims were more frequently recorded as having died as the result of a beating (n=51; 21%) than any other cause.

Table 2: Overview of incident characteristics by homicide type, 2002–03 to 2011–12

	Intimate partner		Filicide		Parricide		Siblicide		Other family		All other homicides	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
	654		186		128		37		83		1,543	
Location												
Victim home	445	68	150	81	113	88	22	59	45	54	512	33
Other home ^a	72	11	11	6	4	3	7	20	11	13	260	17
Health/mental care facility ^b	5	1	1	1	4	3	1	3	1	1	16	1
Retail/recreation establishment ^c	3	<1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	109	7
Public transport ^d	6	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	67	4
Workplace/School	5	1	0	0	2	2	0	0	2	2	18	1
Street/road/Highway	40	6	3	2	2	2	3	8	8	10	333	22
Sporting oval/facility	3	<1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	18	1
Open area/waterway	50	8	9	5	1	1	4	11	8	10	115	7
Other ^e	15	2	10	5	2	2	0	0	3	4	68	4
Unknown	10	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	2	2	27	2
Time												
Midnight to before 6am	151	23	39	21	22	17	8	22	20	24	462	30
6am to before noon	96	15	38	20	25	20	6	16	12	14	164	11
Noon to before 6pm	121	19	47	25	23	18	10	27	21	25	218	14
6pm to before midnight	218	33	42	23	46	36	13	35	26	31	567	37

Table 2: Overview of incident characteristics by homicide type, 2002–03 to 2011–12 cont.

	Intimate partner		Filicide		Parricide		Sibicide		Other family		All other homicides	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Unknown	68	10	20	11	12	9	0	0	4	5	132	9
Day of the week												
Sunday	79	12	20	11	18	14	7	20	8	10	286	19
Monday	102	16	36	19	16	13	4	11	6	7	176	11
Tuesday	103	16	22	12	14	11	4	11	12	14	167	11
Wednesday	81	12	25	13	17	13	2	5	14	17	176	11
Thursday	95	16	28	15	26	20	10	27	16	19	197	13
Friday	88	13	19	10	14	11	4	11	13	16	232	15
Saturday	95	15	32	17	21	16	6	16	13	16	276	18
Unknown	11	2	4	2	2	2	0	0	1	1	33	2
Seasons												
Summer	179	27	48	26	27	21	11	30	24	29	464	30
Autumn	157	24	34	18	35	27	4	11	21	25	366	24
Winter	154	24	47	25	33	26	15	41	20	24	331	21
Spring	162	25	57	31	32	25	7	19	18	22	375	24
Unknown	2	<1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	7	<1

a: includes offender home and other home

b: includes hospitals and psychiatric facilities

c: includes shopping malls and recreation/food venues

d: includes car parks and public transportation connected facilities

e: includes private motor vehicles and corrective institutions

Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2011–12 [computer file]

Table 3: Overview of victim characteristics by homicide type, 2002–03 to 2011–12

	Intimate partner		Filicide		Parricide		Sibicide		Other family		All other homicides	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
	654		238		134		40		92		1,634	
Sex												
Male	166	25	132	56	73	54	32	80	64	70	1,351	83
Female	488	75	105	44	61	46	8	20	28	30	282	17
Unknown	0	0	1	<1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	<1
Age group												
Under 1	0	0	76	32	0	0	0	0	0	0	17	1
1–9	0	0	122	51	0	0	2	5	5	5	20	1
10–14	1	<1	27	11	0	0	0	0	2	2	12	1
15–17	12	2	4	2	0	0	4	10	3	3	51	3
18–24	83	13	4	2	0	0	5	13	15	16	262	16
25–34	158	24	5	2	4	3	11	28	12	13	392	24
35–49	258	39	0	0	31	23	14	35	21	23	509	31
50–64	98	15	0	0	48	36	4	10	19	21	248	15
65 and over	37	6	0	0	51	38	0	0	15	16	119	7
Unknown	7	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	<1
Apparent cause of death												
Gunshot wound	70	11	13	5	16	12	5	13	15	16	266	16
Stab wound	276	42	35	15	73	54	20	50	43	47	551	34
Beating	136	21	51	21	26	19	11	28	22	24	487	30

Table 3: Overview of victim characteristics by homicide type, 2002–03 to 2011–12 cont.

	Intimate partner		Filicide		Parricide		Siblicide		Other family		All other homicides	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Drug overdose (administered by offender)	10	2	8	3	2	1	0	0	2	2	19	1
Drowning/submersion	0	0	22	9	0	0	0	0	1	1	14	1
Strangulation/suffocation	90	14	33	14	11	8	2	5	4	4	74	5
Poisoning	5	1	17	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	<1
Smoke inhalation/Burns	19	3	10	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	38	2
Other ^a	13	2	38	16	5	4	2	5	5	5	117	7
Unknown	35	5	11	5	1	1	0	0	0	0	67	4

a: includes electrocution and hanging

Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2011–12 [computer file]

Table 4: Overview of offender^a characteristics by homicide type, 2002–03 to 2011–12

	Intimate partner		Filicide		Parricide		Siblicide		Other family		All other homicides	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
	654		186		128		37		83		1,268	
Sex												
Male	503	77	90	48	103	80	33	89	72	87	1,198	94
Female	151	23	96	52	23	18	4	11	11	13	65	5
Unknown	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Age group												
10–14	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	10	1
15–17	5	1	3	2	13	10	3	8	5	6	62	5
18–24	62	9	43	23	29	23	6	16	22	26	332	26
25–34	159	24	73	39	35	27	14	38	19	23	392	31
35–49	265	41	56	30	34	27	11	30	22	27	352	28
50–64	115	18	6	3	13	10	2	5	9	11	84	7
Over 65	38	6	1	1	1	1	0	0	4	5	21	2
Unknown	10	2	4	2	2	2	1	3	1	1	15	1

a: offender n relates to the primary offender in each incident. For 'all other homicides' category only 1268 incidents involved an identified offender

Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2011–12 [computer file]

Conceptualising homicide incidents

Every homicide is different. The contexts of these events vary depending on several factors including the motives of offenders, precipitating events and personal characteristics of the victims and offenders. Understanding the nuances of these differences requires qualitative incident specific analysis beyond the scope of this paper. However, some additional data analysis is presented to indicate the presence, or absence, of some of these factors in domestic/family homicide incidents. The features examined were multiple victim/offender incidents, history of domestic violence between intimate partners, whether the offender was on bail prior to the incident or suicided after the incident, and drug and alcohol use by the victim and offender.

Most domestic/family homicide incidents involved a single victim and offender (n=960; 88%) (see Table 5). Although rare, when additional victims/offenders were involved, they tended to be family members as well. From 2002–03 through 2011–12, a small number of intimate partner homicides (n=54; 8%) involved multiple victims and/or offenders. Of the 27 intimate partner homicides that involved multiple victims (including incidents with multiple victims/offenders), 23 (85%) also involved the death of one or more children and the remaining four included the deaths of other family members.

In each of the twenty-nine filicide incidents which involved multiple victims at least one additional victim was another child. Of the seventeen filicide incidents that involved one child and multiple offenders, the additional offender was a family member and in sixteen of these incidents both parents of the child were involved. Ten parricide incidents resulted in the death of both parents of the offender.

Table 5: Multiple victim/offender domestic/family homicide incidents by relationship category, 2002–03 to 2012–12

	Intimate partner		Ficide		Parricide		Sibicide		Other family	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Multiple victims	25	4	28	15	10	8	0	0	2	2
Multiple offenders	27	4	17	9	6	5	1	3	8	10
Multiple victims/offenders	2	<1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1
Single victim/offender	600	92	140	75	112	88	36	97	72	87
Total incidents	654		186		128		37		83	

Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2011–12 [computer file]

Data analysed for this report indicated that in one-third (n=366; 34%) of domestic/family homicide incidents there was a recorded history of domestic violence which may have included a current or former protection order between the victim and offender. The proportion of incidents with a domestic violence history varied by the family relationship category from eight percent (n=3) of siblicides to 44 percent (n=289) of intimate partner homicides (see Table 6).

The remaining analyses pertained to offender characteristics and were based on the primary offender (ie the offender with the closest relationship to the victim). It is therefore possible that additional offenders, in the rare incidents involving multiple offenders, may have been on bail, used alcohol and/or other drugs prior to the offence. They may also have suicided following the offence. A smaller proportion of primary offenders of domestic/family homicide (n=56; 5%) than non-domestic/family homicide (n=112; 9%) were on bail, parole or probation at the time of the incidents. Suicide of the offender following the homicide was more frequently recorded in domestic/family homicides, particularly those which involved the deaths of intimate partners (n=75; 11%) or children (n=29; 16%) (see Table 6).

Alcohol and other drug use is frequently discussed in homicide literature as a potential contributing factor, however the relationship remains unclear (for example, see Dearden & Payne 2009). Alcohol and drug use can alter the circumstances of the incident by affecting the judgement of the victim and/or offender or by incapacitating the victim in some way (intentionally, or not). The NHMP data identified the presence of alcohol and other drugs in a homicide incident but not the impact of their use on the victim, offender or situation. It is important to note that victim data are derived from toxicology reports accessed through the NCIS and that offender alcohol and drug use is indicated, or not, by police services during the NHMP data collection process.

Overall, data from 2002–03 through 2011–12 indicated more use of alcohol than illicit drugs in both domestic/family and non-domestic/family homicides (see Table 6). The use of alcohol by both victims and offenders was recorded in 30 percent of non-domestic/family homicide incidents (n= 379) and 22 percent (n=239) of all domestic/family homicides (range: 1%(filicide)–46%(sibicide)).

Table 6: Presence of additional characteristics in homicide incidents, 2002–03 through 2011–12^a

	Intimate partner		Filicide		Parricide		Siblicide		Other family		All other homicides	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Prior history of domestic violence	289	44	41	22	23	18	3	8	10	12	n/a	
Offender on bail, parole or probation at time of incident	40	6	5	3	6	5	1	3	4	5	112	9
Offender suicided prior to or following arrest	75	11	29	16	5	4	0	0	2	2	25	2
Incident involves presence of alcohol – victim	226	35	2	1	30	23	21	57	25	30	627	41
Incident involves presence of alcohol – offender	235	36	20	11	27	21	17	46	35	42	509	40
Incident involves presence of alcohol – victim & offender	180	28	2	1	17	13	17	46	23	28	379	30
Incident involves presence of drugs – victim	122	19	12	7	10	8	10	27	13	16	405	26
Incident involves presence of drugs – offender	78	12	34	18	16	13	3	8	5	6	213	17
Incident involves presence of drugs – victim & offender	51	8	4	2	1	1	3	8	3	4	102	8

a: offender n relates to the primary offender in each incident. For relationship category 'all other homicides' only 1,268 incidents involved an identified offender

Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2011–12 [computer file]

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to update Mouzos and Rushforth's (2003) findings describing characteristics of domestic/family homicides in Australia from 1 July 2002 to 30 June 2012. In 2003, Mouzos and Rushforth concluded that policy and other strategies targeted at preventing these homicides were warranted and this remains true today. Although homicide is declining, two in five victims are killed by a family member and these victims are most commonly partners, parents and children. It is intended that these data will support and contextualise, at a national level, the findings of jurisdictional child and intimate partner death review teams that have been initiated across Australia as well as other research currently being undertaken.

References

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