



Family Homicide in Australia

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Abstract:

Since the inception of the National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP) at the Australian Institute of Criminology in 1990, data is collected on all homicides coming to police attention in Australia. This includes details relating to incidents, victims and offenders of homicide, as well as the relationship between the victim and offender. Using data collected as part of the NHMP, including the latest figures for 2001/2002, this paper presents the findings of an examination of the circumstances and characteristics of family homicides in Australia over a thirteen-year period. The examination will include details on the homicide of intimates, children and other family members.

Family Homicide in Australia

Introduction

Contrary to public perceptions that we are most at risk of homicide by a stranger, when a homicide occurs in Australia and elsewhere, it is most likely to involve persons who are known to each other, such as, friends, acquaintances, and family members. As Wolfgang (1958) noted almost half a century ago: “Criminal homicide is probably the most personalized crime in our society ... [it involves] a dynamic relationship between two or more persons caught up in a life drama where they operate in a direct, interactional relationship. More so than in any other violation of conduct norms, the relationship the victim bears to the offender plays a role in explaining the reasons for such flagrant violation” (p. 203). Many following in the footsteps of Wolfgang (1958) have also noted the importance of the victim-offender relationship, and how the characteristics of the homicide itself will vary depending on who gets killed and who does the killing. This is particularly important in the context of family homicides, which can encompass various types of victim-offender relationships. For example, intimate partners, parents killing children, children killing parents, siblings killing each other, and so on.

Most research to date, in Australia and elsewhere, has focused predominantly on examining the various types of family homicides as a single entity. Few studies have explored, compared and contrasted the various types of family homicides in order to determine how they are similar and dissimilar. The purpose of this paper is to examine the circumstances and characteristics of family homicides in Australia over a thirteen-year period. The examination will include details on the homicide of intimates, children and other family members.

Definition of Family Homicide

For the purposes of this study, family homicide includes the following:

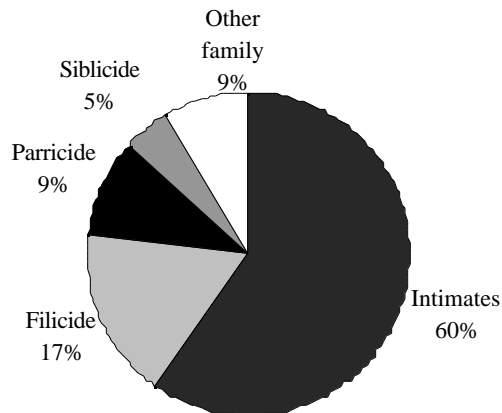
- Intimates: Current and former intimate partners (married and cohabiting (de-facto));
- Filicide: Custodial and non-custodial (step-parents) parents killing their children;
- Parricide: Children killing their parents;
- Siblicide: homicide between siblings; and
- Other Family: cousins, in-laws, etc.

Data Sources

The current study analysed data held as part of the National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP) at the Australian Institute of Criminology. In brief, the NHMP data set holds details pertaining to the incident, victim, offender, and the relationship between the victim and offender (a total of 77 variables). Currently, this data set has details on a total of 4,111 homicide incidents, 4,526 identified offenders and 4,421 victims of homicide, which occurred between 1 July 1989 and 30 June 2002.

Prevalence

Of the 4,421 victims of homicide that occurred in Australia during the 13-year period, 1,671 or 38 per cent involved family members. On average, about 129 family homicides occur each year, with Intimate partner homicides accounting for three out of five family homicides (Figure 1). Siblicide is the least common type of family homicide in Australia, with less than six homicides per year involving siblings.

Figure 1: Distribution of Family Homicides in Australia

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP), 1989/90 – 2001/02 [computer file]

Intimate Partner Homicide

Over the thirteen-year period covered by this analysis, there were on average 77 intimate partner homicides each year. The majority involved men killing their female intimate partners (75%). Only 20 per cent of the offenders of intimate homicides were female, confirming prior research that males are more likely than females to kill their intimate partner (Silverman and Kennedy 1993; Silverman and Mukherjee 1987; Websdale 1999). Racial disparity is also common in intimate partner homicides. Despite Indigenous Australians representing just over two per cent of the total Australian population, they account for just under a quarter of the intimate partner homicides. Previous research on Indigenous homicides finds that very rarely do they occur between strangers, with family members, usually intimate partners the likely victims of an Indigenous offender (Mouzos 2001).

Age differences were also noted: when male intimates were killed, they were more likely to be older than the offender (53%), whereas when females were killed by their intimate partner, they were more likely to be younger than their offender (68%). Just over one in ten intimate partner homicides involved a victim or offender who was employed at the time of the killing.

In terms of the type of weapons used in intimate partner homicides, the data indicate that knives and other sharp instruments were used in 40 per cent of homicides. This was followed by assaultive force, that is, hands and/or feet (22%) and firearms (22%). Blunt instruments were utilised in one out of ten intimate partner homicides. When gender of the victims was considered, it seems that a higher proportion of female intimates than male intimates were beaten to death (27% versus 8%), whereas a higher proportion of male intimates than female intimates were stabbed to death (55% versus 33%).

Some suggest that intimate partner homicide is at the extreme end of a continuum of domestic violence (Websdale 1999). Most domestic violence usually occurs within the privacy of one's home. Intimate partner homicide is no different. Four out of five intimate partner homicides occurred in the victims, offenders or some other persons home. The majority of intimate partner homicides took place during the evening or early morning (6pm–6am), and on a weekday (70%).

Filicide

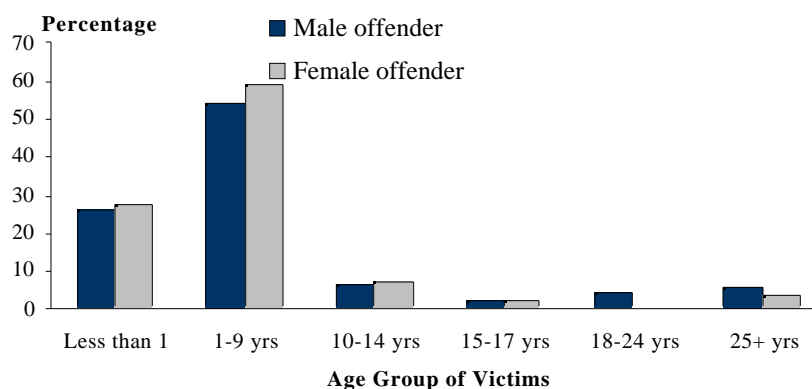
Newspaper reports late last year reported the jailing of a father for life for killing his three children. They termed such homicides as “abominable crimes” (Daily Telegraph, 05/12/02, p. 23). No crime other than the killing of children provokes as much outrage in society. This is especially true when those who are supposed to protect and nurture, turn on their own offspring and take their life away in the most unnatural way possible.

Between 1 July 1989 and 30 June 2002, there were on average 25 children killed by their parents each year. Three-quarters of these homicides were committed in a residential location. Just over half of the filicides occurred during the day (54%).

In terms of the gender of the victims, both males and females experienced a relatively similar level of risk of homicide by a parent. Gender differences of the offenders of filicide were observed (Figure 2).

Overall, fathers (including step-fathers) were responsible for 63 per cent of filicides. However, compared to all family homicides, female offenders were involved in a higher proportion of filicides, than any other type of family homicide. Children under the age of 10 years old were found to represent the majority of filicide victims. Female filicide offenders, that is, mothers and step-mothers were more likely than male filicide offenders to kill a child under the age of 15 years. During the thirteen-year period under examination, no female filicide offender killed a child aged between 18 and 24 years.

Figure 2: Age Distribution of Victims of Filicide by Gender of Offender



Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP), 1989/90 – 2001/02 [computer file]

Given the vulnerability of children, the types of weapons used in filicide were different to those mostly used in intimate partner homicide. Just under half of all filicide victims were killed with the use of assaultive force, that is, hands and/or feet (46%), followed by a knife or some other sharp instrument (13%). A further 10 per

cent of filicide victims were killed by poison. This includes carbon monoxide poisoning, usually through the use of a motor vehicle.

A quarter of the filicides involved the parent also committing suicide following the event (murder-suicides). This compares to about six per cent in the general homicide offender population (Mouzos 2002).

Parricide

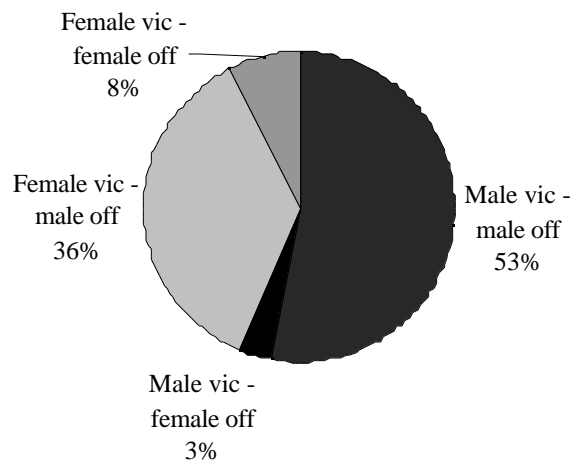
The term parricide refers to the killing of one's father (patricide) or mother (matricide). The literature on parricide suggests that there are various types of parricidal offenders. For example, Heide (1992) suggests that three types of individuals commit parricide: (1) severely abused children who are pushed beyond their limits; (2) severely mentally ill children; and (3) dangerously antisocial children. Previous research also suggests that the most common type of parricidal offender is the severely abused child. Mones (1991) reports that more than 90 per cent of youths who commit parricide have been previously abused by their parents. This abuse can take the form of physical, psychological, sexual as well as verbal abuse.

In Australia, there are on average 12 parricides committed annually. The overwhelming majority occur in a residential location (94%), and during the evening. An examination of the gender distribution in parricide indicates that males as victims and offenders account for just over half of all parricides. In other words, half of all parricides involve sons killing fathers. When daughters are responsible for the killing, they are more likely to kill their mothers rather than their fathers (Figure 3).

Similar to intimate partner homicides, a knife or some other sharp instrument was the most common weapon used to commit parricide (44%), followed by a firearm (23%), and assaultive force (19%). This did not vary by the gender of the victims.

Compared to filicides, few parricides involve the death of the offender (9%), with no female parricide offenders committing suicide following the murder.

Figure 3: Gender Distribution of Parricide Victims and Offenders



Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP), 1989/90 – 2001/02 [computer file]

Siblicide

There is a paucity of research on violence between siblings, and especially lethal violence. Of the limited research that is available, the consensus is that the most common circumstances preceding siblicides were some form of argument. However, Ewing (1997, p. 117) explains that the precipitating circumstances may in fact be more complex than they appear: “the answer [of why siblings may kill one another] may lie in the nature of the sibling bond and the long-standing rivalries and conflicts that so often mark the relationships between perpetrators and victims in cases of fratricide [brother] and sororicide [sister]”. In Australia, there are on average about 6

homicides a year that occur between siblings. Like other family homicides, most occur in a residential location (79%), and during the evening (58%).

Available research suggests that a female is more likely to kill her brother rather than her sister (Wallace 1986; Underwood and Patch 1999; Ewing 1997). The present research offers further support, with female offenders killing their brother rather than their sister. Four out of five siblicides involved the killing of a brother. In 53 per cent of siblicides, the victim is older than the offender. A knife or some other sharp instrument was found to be the most common weapon used in siblicide (41%), and this was followed by assaultive force (17%). Firearms and blunt instruments were employed equally third in siblicide (14%). Interestingly, all siblicides were committed by an offender acting alone, and not with other offenders.

Other Family Homicide

In Australia, there are on average 11 homicides that occur between other family members. This includes cousins, in-laws, grandparents and other family. As with intimate partner homicides, filicides and siblicides, most other family homicides take place within the privacy of one's home, that is, at a residential location (76%).

Wallace (1986) reported that the common theme running through other family homicides and particularly the in-law killings was marital conflict and usually marital violence:

The domestic dispute had spread to include other members of the family who adoptive a protective role of the abused spouse, the wife. It was this involvement which eventually led to their becoming embroiled in a violent clash with their in-laws (Wallace 1986, p. 157).

Most other family homicides are committed by males (88%) with the gender of other family homicide victims closely resembling the distribution of homicide victims in

general (63% male; 37% female). Interestingly, a high proportion of other family homicides involved an Indigenous victim and offender (33%). This may reflect the extended nature of many Indigenous family relationships. Similar to siblicides, the victim of other family homicides is usually older than the offender (56%). In addition, a knife or some other sharp instrument was the weapon of choice in other family homicides. This was followed by assaultive force (28%), and a firearm (23%). Only 4 per cent of other family homicides involved the offender committing suicide following the incident.

Concluding Comments

This paper has examined the circumstances and characteristics of the various types of family homicides in Australia between 1 July 1989 and 30 June 2002. Differences emerged between the various types of family homicides in terms of the weapons used, gender distribution of victims and offenders and temporal characteristics. This brief analysis suggests that prevention policies should be tailored to address each distinctive type of family homicide, rather than family homicide as a whole.

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