

# CRIME AND JUSTICE

## Bulletin



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# Homicide

## Introduction

Homicide is the offence category which attracts the greatest public attention, yet the popular conception of homicide, and the manner in which the media typically present homicide are often not supported by the facts. This bulletin presents information on the nature of homicide in New South Wales, the characteristics of offenders and victims, and the context in which such homicides occur. It also considers the incidence of homicide over recent decades, and demonstrates that there is no evidence of any increasing trend in the homicide rate. Much of the material in this bulletin is drawn from *Homicide: The Social Reality* (Wallace, 1986) and an update of that report (Bonney, 1988). Together these reports cover homicides in N.S.W. over the 19 year period 1968 to 1986. Readers are referred to these two reports for more detailed analyses.

## The Definition of Homicide

The term homicide can be used to describe a variety of deaths caused intentionally or unintentionally, lawfully or unlawfully. In this bulletin the term is used to describe unlawful killings known to the police, excluding those caused by motor vehicle accidents. The term includes matters in which charges of murder, conspiracy to murder, manslaughter or infanticide were laid (irrespective of the outcome of such charges at court), incidents considered by police to be murder in which the alleged offender committed suicide, and all unsolved homicides which the police regard as murder. Details presented in this bulletin relate to alleged offenders and to the alleged facts of each case.

## The Incidence of Homicide in NSW

The incidence of homicide is best expressed as a rate (i.e. the number of

homicides per 100,000 head of population) which takes into account any changes in the size of the population. Readers are reminded of the point made in Bulletin No. 1, *Trends in Serious Crime*, that since the number of homicides per year is relatively low (there are approximately 100 murders per year in N.S.W.), single incidents in which a number of people are killed can have a significant impact on the homicide rate in a particular year.

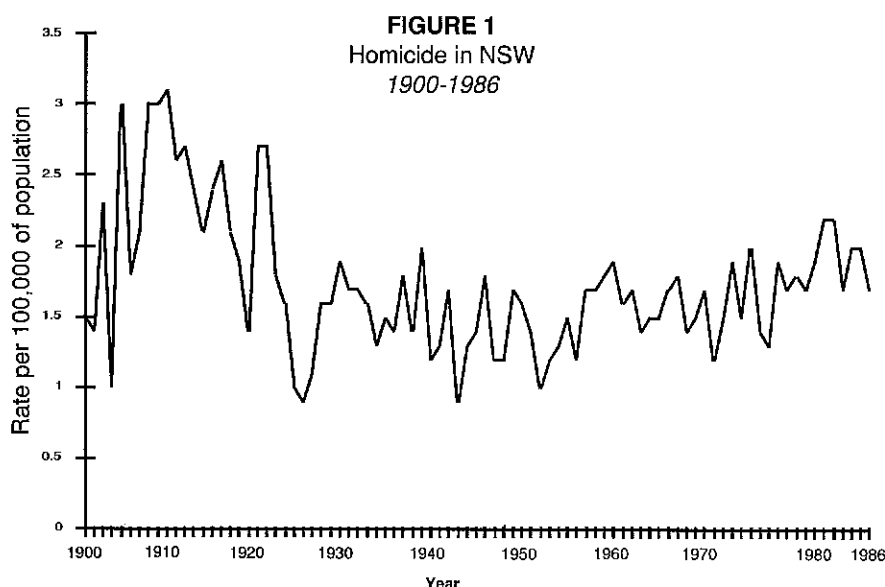
Over the 19 year period 1968 to 1986 the N.S.W. homicide rate has remained relatively stable, at a level slightly less than was evident earlier this century (see Figure 1). The 1986 rate was 1.7 per 100,000 population. There was no significant increase in the rate of homicide in N.S.W. between 1968 and 1986 ( $F=0.33$ ,  $p>0.05$ ).

## How Does NSW Compare With Other States, Territories and Countries ?

The N.S.W. homicide rate approximates the Australian rate and is similar to that for all other Australian states and territories with the exception of the Northern Territory.

Despite large fluctuations in the Northern Territory rate, that rate has been consistently many times higher than the national rate. In 1981 the rate of 26 per 100,000 was 14 times the national rate, and in 1985 (the last year for which data is available) the rate of 11.8 per 100,000 was six times the national rate. The N.S.W. rate in 1985 was 2.0 per 100,000.

The N.S.W. and Australian homicide rates are similar to, though slightly higher than, the rates in countries such as Israel (1.8),



Scotland and New Zealand, each of which had a rate of 1.6 per 100,000 in 1980. The rates in Belgium, Spain, the Netherlands, Ireland, Greece, England and Wales are all lower than the rate in Australia and range between 0.7 and 1.0 per 100,000. The United States on the other hand had in 1978 a rate of 9.4 per 100,000, approximately 5 times the Australian rate.

Whilst the N.S.W. rate has remained stable in recent times, that has not been the experience of a number of comparable industrialised nations such as West Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States, all of which have experienced marked increases since the 1960's. The United States homicide rate almost doubled between 1960 and 1980.

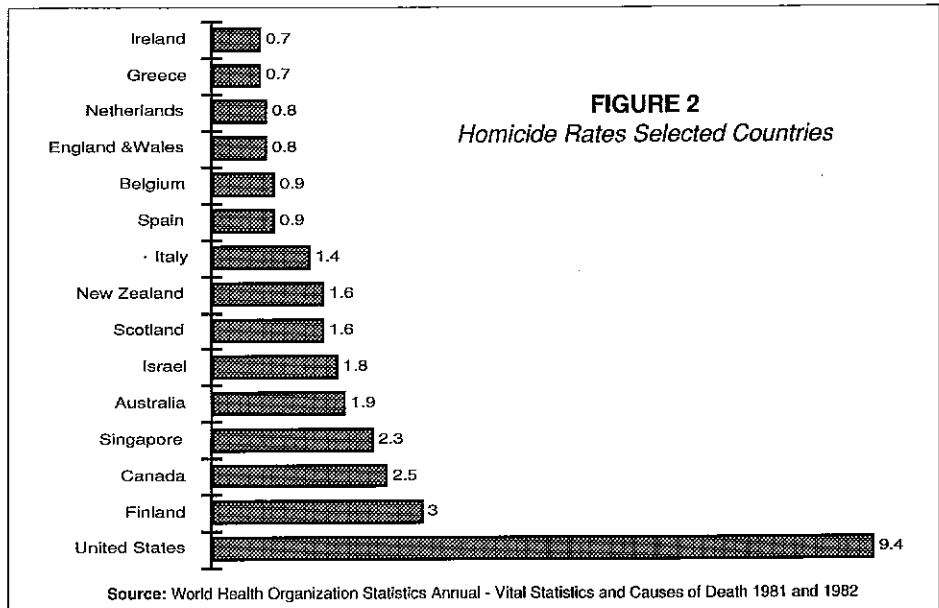
**Rates of Homicide Compared With Other Forms of Violent Death**

In order to place the extent of homicide in N.S.W. in some perspective, Wallace (1986) presented data relating to other forms of violent death. She found that in 1981, whilst the homicide rate was 2.2 per 100,000, the rate for those killed in traffic accidents was 24.9, the rate of suicide was 10.6, and deaths due to industrial accidents 5.0.

*"Thus eleven times as many people were killed on the roads as became victims of homicide; five times as many people killed themselves and more than twice the number were killed in accidents while at work than those killed in homicide incidents. The homicide rate is relatively low when compared with these other violent deaths" (Wallace, 1986:17).*

**Homicide Victims and Suspects**

In N.S.W., homicide occurs most commonly within the family, or between friends and acquaintances. The killing of



strangers occurs much less frequently.

**The Suspect** A suspect is charged in about 94% of homicide cases. Homicide suspects are disproportionately young and male. During the period 1968 to 1986, 1,875 persons were alleged to have committed one or more homicides: 84.9 per cent of these were male. More than half of all suspects over the same period were aged between 15 and 29 years, although that age grouping accounted for only one quarter of the population.

Aborigines, those with unskilled occupations, and the unemployed were all over-represented amongst homicide suspects.

A large proportion of male suspects (39.1%) and the majority of the female suspects (68.6%) had no previous criminal record. Only a small proportion of men and very few women had previously been convicted of a violent offence.

Not only were homicide offenders less likely than other violent offenders to have

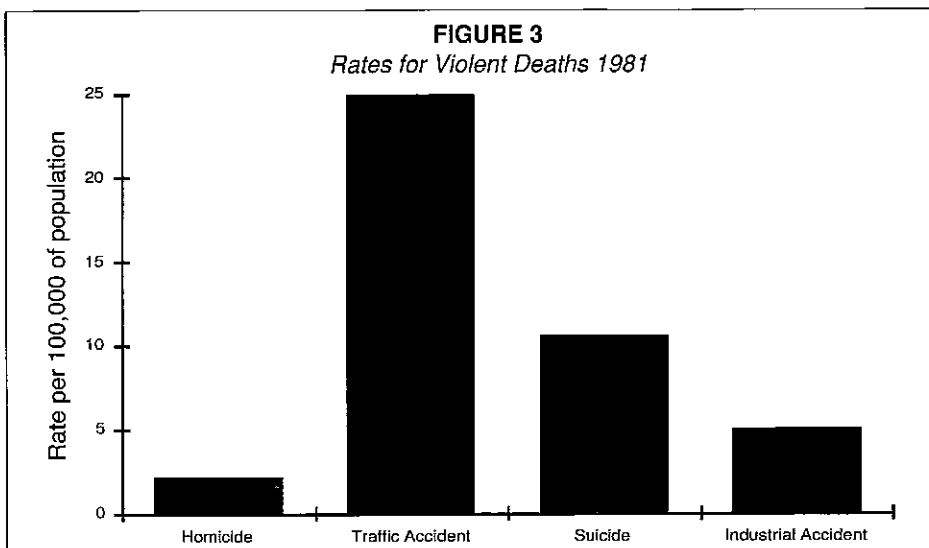
a previous criminal record, but they were also less likely to re-offend. (Burgoyne, 1979). There did not appear to be a higher rate of mental disorder, (as indicated by prior treatment) amongst homicide suspects than in the community generally.

**The Victim** As with the suspects, victims of homicide were mostly male, although the over-representation of males was not as great amongst victims as it was amongst suspects. Almost one third of victims were female. The ages of victims were more evenly distributed than were the ages of suspects, although a disproportionate number were aged between 20 and 29 years (22.3%). Approximately 1 in 10 victims were children under 10 years.

Adult victims tended to be drawn from lower socio-economic classes. Aborigines were over-represented amongst victims of homicide, but to a lesser extent than their level of over-representation as suspects. Few victims had any previous criminal record.

**The Relationship Between Victim and Suspect** Most homicides involved males killing males (56.0%), or females (29.3%). Relatively few females were alleged to have committed homicide, and most of those allegedly killed males, rather than other females.

Unlike the popular image of homicide, most homicides are not committed by strangers. In more than 8 out of 10 of cleared homicides, the victim and suspect were known to one another, often quite intimately. In fact, 42.9% of victims were killed by a member of their own family and 20.4% were killed by friends or acquaintances.



tances. Killings by strangers accounted for 17.2% of cleared homicides.

Figure 4 shows the relationship between victim and suspect, and gives further detail of the nature of the relationship in family homicides. The largest category of family killing is that between spouses. In fact, almost one in four of all homicides in NSW are spouse killings.

An even greater proportion of females (68.0%) than males (28.4%) were killed by members of their own family. Males were almost equally likely to be killed by friends or acquaintances (26.7%), as by family. Also, 22.0% of males were killed by strangers, compared with only 9.0% of females.

Not only were female victims more likely to be killed by a family member, but female suspects typically killed within the family (80.7%). For male suspects the pattern of relationship was quite different than for female suspects: 36.5% of males

**TABLE 1**  
*Sex of suspect by sex of victim: NSW 1968 - 1986*

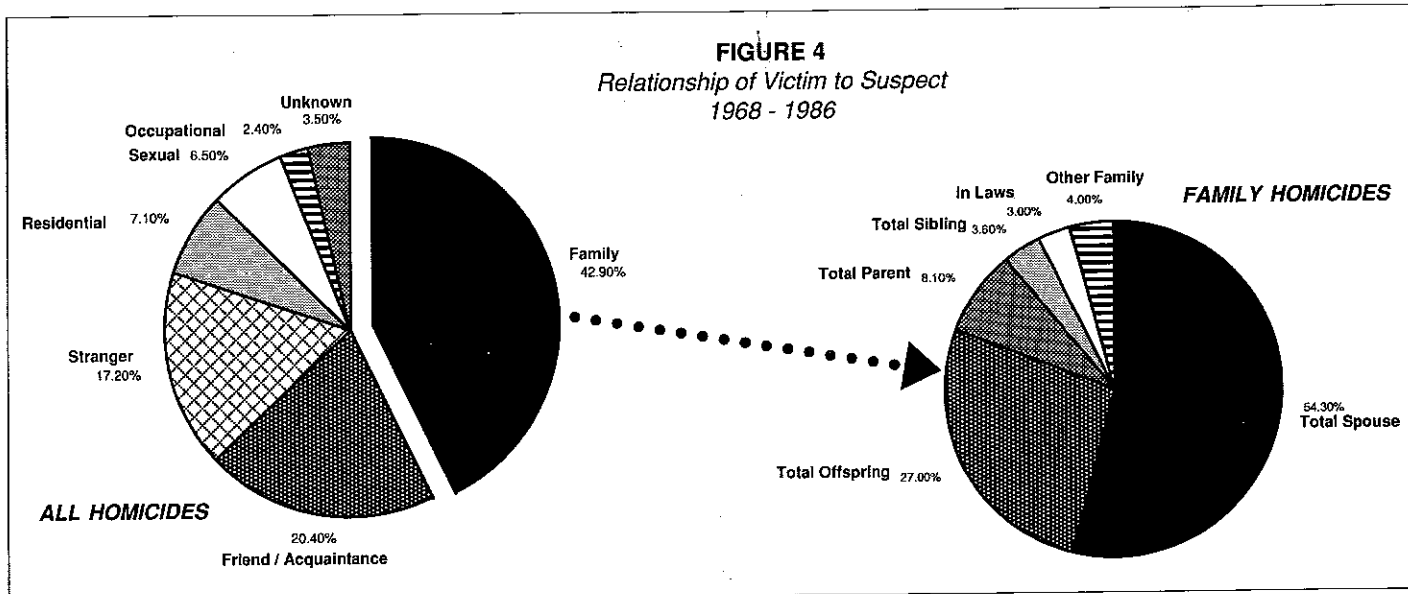
Type of Relationship	No.	%
Male suspect - male deceased	1,145	56.0
Male suspect - female deceased	598	29.3
Female suspect - male deceased	230	11.3
Female suspect - female deceased	68	3.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,041</b>	<b>100.0</b>

however, in homicides committed in rural areas compared with urban areas. A larger proportion of homicides in rural areas occurred within the family - 47.2% compared with 37.5% in urban areas. Urban areas on the other hand had a higher proportion of homicides in which the victim and suspect were strangers - 17.6% compared with 11.2% in rural areas.

Within urban areas homicides were not evenly distributed: 87.1% occurred within

male victims (48.6%) were killed in a private dwelling. Indeed, 66.7% of all female victims were killed in their own home, compared with 38.1% of male victims. The bedroom was the most common location of the homicide incident for both males and females, although 23.7% of all female homicide victims were killed in the bedroom, compared with 12.1% of all male homicide victims.

Next to the home, the most common place of death was the street (including



killed family members, 22.7% killed friends or acquaintances and 19.5% killed strangers.

There is no evidence that the rate of homicide per 100,000 population committed by family members, friends and acquaintances, or strangers has increased over the 19 year period studied.

**The Homicide Incident**

(a) *Where do homicides occur?* Whilst the largest number of homicides occurred in urban areas, when analysed in terms of rate per 100,000 population, urban (1.9) and rural (2.0) homicide rates were similar.

There were some differences evident,

the Sydney Metropolitan Area, and a large number of these homicides occurred within relatively few suburbs. The City, Bondi, Darlinghurst, Potts Point, Redfern and Newtown made up 46% of all killings within the Central Sydney Division but constituted only 19% of the population of that area.

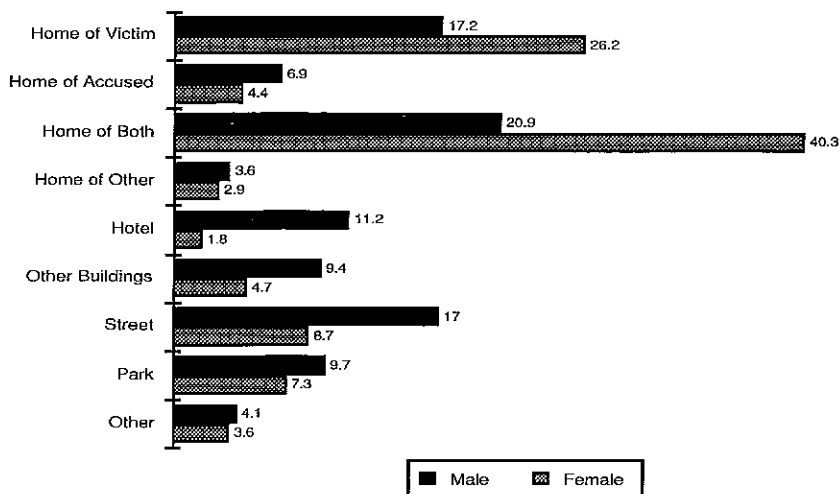
The majority of homicides occurred in a private dwelling (57.8%). In fact, almost half of all homicides occurred in the victim's home (48.4%) and, in more than half of these cases (58.9%) it was the home shared by both the victim and the offender.

There were marked differences however, in the location of the offence according to the sex of the victim. A much greater proportion of female victims (73.8%) than

cars), with 17% of males and 8.7% of females being killed in the street. Whilst almost half (45.4%) of the male street killings were committed by strangers, this was not so for female victims who were again much more likely to be killed by family members: 58.1% of females killed in the street were killed by family members, 20.0% were killed by strangers.

(b) *When do homicides occur?* Male homicide victims were much more likely to be killed on a Saturday (21.2%) than on any other day of the week. This was not the case for female victims for whom the proportions killed on any day were more evenly spread over the week, with a slightly higher proportion occurring on Thursday (15.8%) and Friday (15.3%).

**FIGURE 5**  
*Percentage of Victims of each sex by Location of Incident (1968 - 1986)*



The day upon which the homicide occurred varied, however, depending upon the relationship between the victim and the offender. Homicides committed within the family tended to be equally distributed throughout the week, whilst those involving friends or strangers were more likely to occur on a Friday or Saturday: 36.2% of friend killings and 43.6% of stranger killings occurred on a Friday or Saturday.

**(c) The use of weapons** The most commonly used weapon over the 1968 to 1986 period was the gun - 35.2% of all victims were killed by a gun. Bashings, strangling and other such manual methods were the next most common means employed (See Figure 6). There was little difference in the type of method used depending upon the sex of the victim, but clear differences when the sex of the suspect was considered: of male suspects, 31.3% used guns, and 27.6% used manual means, compared with 20.5% of female suspects using guns and 19.4% manual means. Female suspects were more likely to use knives (26.9%) than any other method: 18.7% of male suspects used knives.

**Types of Homicide**

Not only does the incidence of homicide vary historically and between different jurisdictions and countries, but so too does the nature of homicide. Homicide is not a uniform phenomenon, but one which varies according to the victim - suspect relationship and the circumstances surrounding the homicide incident.

Politically motivated killings, rare in Australia, are obviously more common in countries which are less politically stable

or where there is civil unrest. Killings which occur in the course of the commission of another offence such as robbery or sexual assault, are also rare in Australia, yet account for almost a third of homicides in the United States.

Since in N.S.W., homicides occur more commonly between family members than in any other social relationship, the following sections focus on family killings. Killings of spouses, children and murder-suicides are each dealt with separately.

**Spouse Killings** Almost one quarter of all cleared homicides in N.S.W. during the study period were spouse killings, and the majority of these (73%) were committed by men. De facto couples were over-represented, relative to their proportion in the general population, although it is not clear why this was so.

Whilst homicides occurred at all stages of the marital relationship, the first few years seemed to be particularly critical: almost half of all spouse homicides (46%) in Wallace's study occurred within the first four years of the relationship.

Alcohol was involved in almost half of spouse killings, but was by no means a pre-requisite for marital violence. Guns were even more prevalent as the method of killing in spouse homicides than in other forms of homicide - 40.9% of all spouse homicide victims were shot, with stabbing the next most common method. All women suspects used weapons in spouse homicides, whilst in 22.6% of spouse homicides committed by men, no weapons were used. This is not an unexpected result given the difference in

physical strength and power between women and men.

Most spouse homicides occurred in and around a private home, usually that of the victim, and in most cases also that of the offender. The most common place for such a homicide to occur was in the bedroom.

A disproportionate number of spouse killings occurred in rural areas, and those were more likely to involve guns (54%) than spouse killings in urban areas (35%).

A large proportion of spouse homicides involved both victims and suspects in unskilled, skilled, clerical or small business classifications, although all socio-economic groups were represented.

Despite much domestic violence going unreported to authorities, there was evidence of such previous violence in 48% of spouse homicides. In almost all of these cases the violence was directed by the husband against the wife. A much higher proportion of cases in which women killed their husbands (70%), indicated evidence of previous domestic violence, and in half of all such cases the accused allegedly acted in response to an immediate threat or attack by the victim.

Whilst few women killed husbands from whom they were separated almost half (46%) of the men who killed spouses were separated from them: 23 women were killed whilst in the process of separating from their spouses. Victims of domestic violence are commonly blamed for not leaving a violent relationship. As this data shows, leaving the relationship did not necessarily end the violence, and for some women had lethal consequences.

A smaller proportion of spouse killings appeared to be related to sexual jealousy and, again, these were almost entirely cases in which women were killed. Disputes over child custody were also apparent in a small number of cases, all of which involved separated couples. In all but one of these cases the children were living with their mother at the time of the killing.

**Child Killings** The second largest category of killings within the family involved the killing of the offspring of the suspect (27% of family killings and 11.5% overall). A child victim may be defined here as one aged less than 10 years, rather than all offspring, some of whom were actually adults at the time of the killing. There

were 188 children aged 0-9 years who were the victims of homicide over the 19 year period 1968 to 1986.

Of all child victims, the largest proportion (40.4%) were younger than one year at the time of their death, and more than 75% were younger than four years. The vast majority of child victims were killed by people known to them (96%), mostly by parents, step-parents or others with loco-parental status. Few children were killed by strangers. In fact, there were only 8 killings by strangers over the 19 year period.

Female suspects were involved in slightly more than half of all child killings, and were responsible for the deaths of 60% of children under five years, whilst males were responsible for more than 80% of the deaths of children five years and over. In more than a quarter of cases in which males killed children, the victim was not the suspect's biological child, but a step child, foster child, or the child of the suspect's de facto. This was rarely the case (6.0%) where women killed children.

Both male and female suspects in child killings tended to be young, more than three quarters being less than 30 years old, with females being much younger than the males. Few women, but almost two thirds of the men had a previous criminal conviction. In addition, over half of the women, and one fifth of the men had had previous treatment for mental illness.

Wallace's study of the period 1968 - 1981 focused upon the killings of children aged 5 years or less. The largest group of child victims in that age group (36.6%) could be described as battered babies who died as a result of assaults upon them by one or both parents. In almost two thirds of cases there was evidence that the children had previously been assaulted. In other cases however, children appeared to have died from a one-off assault. Almost all of the battered children came from two parent families, and de facto relationships were heavily over-represented. In most of these homicides the offender was male, and in almost half of the battered child cases the child was not the biological child of the offender.

A second category of child killing was neonaticide in which an infant was killed within twenty four hours of its birth. There were 17 such cases over the 1968 - 1981 period, in which young women killed their own children. All had concealed both their pregnancies and the birth itself.

Other less common categories of child

deaths were associated with neglect (9 cases), the severe depression of the child's mother following childbirth (13 cases), and murder-suicides in which one of the child's parents killed several (or all) family members prior to committing suicide. (More detail on murder-suicide is presented below.)

The deaths of 24 other young children in Wallace's study occurred in a diverse array of circumstances, not conforming to any particular pattern.

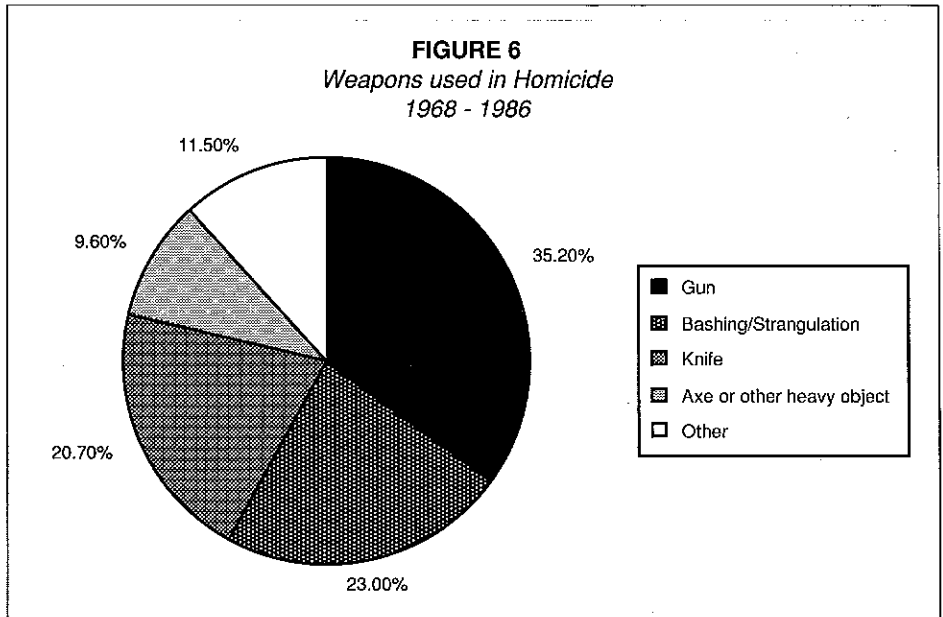
**Other family killings** As depicted in Figure 4 the killing of parents constituted the third largest group of killings within the family (8.1%). In 93% of such cases the suspect was male, and the victims were almost equally divided between mothers and fathers.

accounting for approximately 11% of family homicides. In the majority of such cases, both the victims and suspects were male and such incidents typically occurred between adults.

**Murder - Suicides** Approximately one in nine of the homicides committed in N.S.W. over the 1968 - 1986 period featured the suicide or attempted suicide of the alleged offender. Whilst there were approximately 11,000 suicides in N.S.W. over that period, there were 1,894 homicides, 159 of which involved the suicide of the alleged offender

The suicide, or attempt took place prior to the suspect's arrest for the offence in more than 85% of cases, and typically occurred around the same time as the homicide.

The ratio of male to female suicidal



A factor commonly associated with the killings of fathers was a previous history of violence by the victim directed at the offender, or other family members. Wallace identified seventeen such cases of the 26 father killings over the 1968 - 1981 period. Typically sons, acting alone or in conjunction with their mothers or other siblings, killed abusive fathers.

In other parental killings (15 of the 43 cases during 1968 - 1981), there was evidence of a history of psychological disturbance amongst the offenders. In most of these cases the son killed their mother; fathers were killed less frequently. A small number of parental killings could be characterised as euthanasia (mercy killings).

The killing of siblings, in-laws and other family members was relatively infrequent, the three categories together

suspects was 5:1, but was higher (7.8:1) where the attempt was successful. However, similar proportions of male and female homicide suspects committed suicide. In three quarters of cases the victim and suspect were members of the same family, and in most other cases some prior non-familial relationship existed. Very few cases (2.6%) involved strangers. The majority of victims were female, and most suspects were male.

Suicidal suspects were on average twelve years older, more likely to have a history of mental illness but less likely to have a prior criminal record, and more likely to use guns than non-suicidal suspects. A greater proportion of higher socio-economic status suspects committed suicide than did their low socio-economic status counterparts: 21% of professional/managerial status suspects, 10% of skilled and 6% of unskilled suspects suicided in the

1968 - 1981 period.

There was an over-representation of persons born outside Australia amongst murder-suicide suspects: 37% were born outside Australia as compared with 19.3% of the N.S.W. population.

Four categories were evident amongst the murder-suicides studied by Wallace. The largest category, involving approximately 60% of cases, followed a period of interpersonal dispute, usually between the victim and suspect. Typically these cases were between spouses or lovers, usually involved male suspects, and in most cases they were apparently pre-meditated.

The second category of murder-suicides identified was labelled 'altruistic' by Wallace. In most of these cases the murder was an extension of the suicide. The victims died by virtue of their dependent relationship with the suspect. The victims were not killed out of any hostility towards them, but rather because the offender did not want to leave them behind, to cope alone. Suicidal female suspects typically killed their child or children, whereas suicidal males typically killed their wives as well as their children.

In a small number of 'altruistic' murder-suicides the motivation was apparently that of 'mercy-killing'.

A third smaller category of murder suicides involved offenders who were seriously mentally disturbed. A fourth miscellaneous category included cases where the suicide was in response to an apparently unintended homicide, and where offenders committed suicide whilst in prison either following sentencing or whilst awaiting trial.

**Homicides outside the family** Homicides outside the family most commonly occurred as a result of interpersonal disputes. The largest categories of non-domestic homicides involved violence around pubs, clubs, or other places of entertainment (14.3%), or in special circumstances such as in institutions, between criminal associates or rivals, or between professionals and clients (14.6%). Other such homicides involved neighbours or workmates (9.3%) and, lovers or sexual rivals (10.2%).

Approximately 17% of non-domestic homicides occurred in the course of the commission of another crime such as robbery, theft or sexual assault. With the exception of sexual assault, often such

incidents involved multiple offenders and single victims. A small percentage (3.7%) of homicides occurred when a person intervened either to prevent a crime or to apprehend a suspect. Ideological or politically motivated killings were extremely rare. The killing of the Turkish consul was the only case in the 1968 - 1981 period which was established as being politically motivated. Allegations of political motivation in the bombing of the Hilton Hotel in which 3 people died have not been proved. No other incidents were identified over that time.

#### Conclusion

The research findings challenge the notion of homicide as being pre-meditated, coldly calculated and committed by deranged offenders on unsuspecting victims. On the contrary, homicide in N.S.W. is typically a result of interpersonal conflict, usually between people known to each other, and commonly between members of the same family. In many such cases there is evidence of previous violence. ■

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