Trends in homicide 1968 to 1992

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INTRODUCTION

In August 1990 a man shot five people in a residential block in Surry Hills, a Sydney suburb. The victims included his sister and four neighbours. The offender was arrested. A year later, in August 1991, a man fired several shots at random, killing seven people who were unrelated to himself, in a suburban shopping plaza. The offender also shot and killed himself. Then in October 1992, a man shot six people - mainly family members and acquaintances - in an incident on the Central Coast of New South Wales.

These incidents are disturbing, and have sometimes been taken as evidence that the incidence or character of homicide in New South Wales (NSW) is changing. Whether this is true or not needs careful analysis. Because media reports of homicide tend to focus on the more sensational incidents, they do not provide an accurate picture of the nature and occurrence of the crime. This bulletin explores trends in the pattern of homicides over the last twenty-five years. It examines trends in the overall incidence of homicide, the relative frequency of different types of homicide, the characteristics of victims and offenders, the methods used to commit homicide and the success of the police in apprehending offenders.

DEFINITIONS AND DATA SOURCES

For the purpose of this bulletin, the term homicide is used specifically to describe unlawful killings known to the police, excluding those caused by motor vehicle accidents. Thus it includes deaths for which charges of murder, conspiracy to murder, manslaughter or infanticide were laid (irrespective of the court outcome of such charges), as well as murders in which the alleged offender committed suicide, and unsolved murders.

The data in this bulletin cover the period 1968 to 1992. The information between 1968 and 1986 is taken from earlier reports published by the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research,[1] and has been combined with recent data analysed by the Bureau. The data presented here include all homicides, as defined above, which appeared in NSW Police Service records between 1968 and 1992.
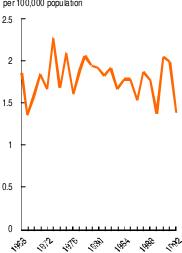
An overview of the nature of homicide in NSW is documented in a previous bulletin.[2] This bulletin updates that information, but focuses on trends.[3]
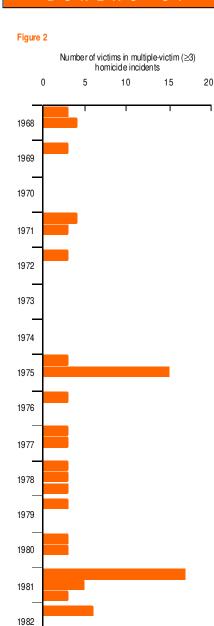
THE INCIDENCE OF HOMICIDE IN NSW

Any changes in the number of homicides must take into account changes in the size of the population. The incidence of homicide is therefore expressed as a rate, namely the number of homicide incidents per 100,000 population.[4] A homicide incident is a single event resulting in the unlawful killing of one or more persons, by one or more offenders.

There were 2,321 homicide incidents, involving 2,544 victims, between 1968 and 1992 in NSW. Over this period there was no significant upward or downward trend in the homicide incident rate. As Figure 1 shows, the annual rate has remained stable, varying between 1.3 and 2.3 homicide incidents per 100,000 population. In terms of the number of incidents, this represents approximately 100 homicides annually in recent years.

Figure 1

Number of homicide incidents per 100,000 population

Although the NSW incident rate has not changed significantly, a question of interest is whether incidents involving multiple victims is on the increase. Over the period studied, most homicide incidents (94.2%) in NSW involved only one victim. Figure 2 is a timeplot of incidents with three or more victims. It indicates that multiple victim homicides are relatively infrequent - about one a year on average - and the number of victims is usually not more than three. Incidents which might be classed as 'mass murders', that is incidents involving five or more victims, occurred nine times in the period considered. This is not a large number, although it is noteworthy that almost all such incidents took place over the last twelve years, and those discussed in the introduction all occurred in the last three years. However, a statistical test indicates that there was no significant change in the frequency of homicides involving three or more victims, over the period studied.[5] There is no evidence therefore to conclude that these occurrences are anything other than random fluctuations in the overall pattern.

Figure 2

Number of victims in multiple-victim (≥3)
homicide incidents
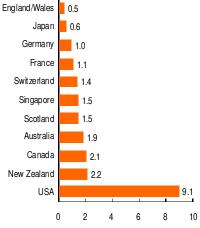

Since the annual number of homicides is relatively low, instances of multiple victim murders, such as those outlined in the introduction, can have an impact on the rate of victims of homicide. The most recent homicide victim rate for NSW - 1.6 victims per 100,000 population in 1992 - is similar to those for other Australian States, with the exception of the Northern Territory, which consistently has a much higher rate than all other States.[6]

At an international level, Figure 3 shows the most recent data for several countries, covering most parts of the developed world. The national rate for Australia (1.9 victims per 100,000 population) is higher than the rates for Japan, England/Wales and other European countries, but lower than those for New Zealand, Canada and the United States of America. Although the rates vary from year to year, the USA consistently has an exceptionally high homicide rate.

Figure 3

Numbers of victims per 100,000 population, 1992

Sources: World Health Organisation Statistics Annual, *Vital statistics and causes of death*, 1992. Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra for Australian data.
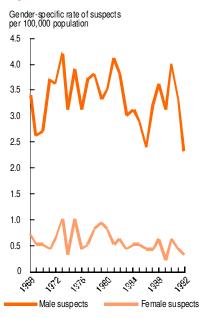
CHARACTERISTICS OF OFFENDERS

GENDER

Suspects were predominantly male. Between 1968 and 1992, of 2,512 known suspects, 2,157 (85.9%) were men. The rate for female offenders was never more than 1 per 100,000 population, while the rate for male offenders varied between 2.3 and 4.2 per 100,000. As Figure 4 shows, this ratio of male to female suspects was quite consistent over the

period studied, and there were no significant trends evident.

Figure 4

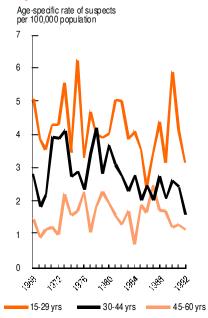Gender-specific rate of suspects
per 100,000 population

The masculine nature of homicide, that is men killing other men as well as women, is universal. The motives and interactions differ however, depending on the victim's gender. Women are frequently passive, and usually non-contributing victims, often family members or sexual intimates. However, according to a study carried out in Victoria,[7] men are often killed as a result of confrontational violence. This mainly involves men who are highly marginal in an economic and social sense. They display high risk-taking behaviour regarding their own, and others lives during disputes. Often conflict, or saving face, escalates to physical violence, and sometimes this results in a fatality. They may also murder in the course of committing another crime.

AGE

Suspects in our sample were disproportionately young, over half (67.1%) being aged between 15 and 34 years. Figure 5 shows the trend in three major age-bands. As indicated, the 15-29 years age group consistently had the highest age-specific suspect rate. The only trend evident was that the rate for suspects in the 30-44 years age group decreased significantly over the period. The rate of suspects in this age group was relatively high throughout the 1970s, but has been declining since 1980.

Figure 5

Age-specific rate of suspects
per 100,000 population

15-29 yrs   30-44 yrs   45-60 yrs

MARITAL STATUS

A recent overview of homicide patterns in Australia[8] suggests that male suspects are more likely to be single or divorced, while female suspects are more likely to be married or in a de facto relationship. NSW data for suspects whose marital status was known[9] accord with this observation. Over the twenty-five year time period, 60.5 per cent of the female suspects were married or in a de facto relationship, compared with 27.6 per cent of the male suspects. Conversely, 42.7 per cent of the male suspects were single or divorced, compared with 21.5 per cent of female suspects. This ties in with the pattern of a relatively high proportion of women offenders involved in spousal homicides - 52.0 per cent of female offenders killed their spouses, compared with 18.2 per cent of male offenders. However, it should be remembered that female offenders are relatively infrequent, and overall, many more women than men are the victims of spousal homicide.
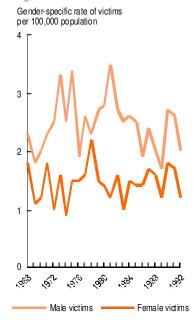
CHARACTERISTICS OF VICTIMS

GENDER

As Figure 6 indicates, there were no significant upward or downward trends over the period in gender-specific rates of homicide victims. The ratio of male to female victims is fairly consistent, but varies more from year to year than the ratio of male to female offenders.
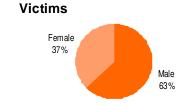
Although most victims were male (62.5%), the percentage of female victims was also large (37.3%).[10]

Figure 6

Gender-specific rate of victims
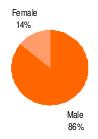per 100,000 population

Male victims   Female victims

While the majority of victims and suspects were male, there was a higher proportion of female victims than female suspects. Figure 7 shows the distribution of victims and suspects by gender, for 1968 -1992.

Figure 7

Victims

Female 37%
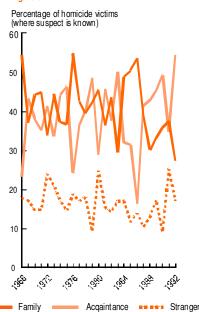
Male 63%

Suspects

Female 14%

Male 86%

AGE

The ages of victims were more evenly distributed than were the ages of suspects, although the highest proportion were aged between 20 and 29 years (23.5%). No trends were evident for any particular age group.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VICTIM AND SUSPECT

The most frequent pattern of suspect-victim incidence was male-male, secondly male-female, then female-male, and very rarely female-female. Given that the frequency pattern was not random, it is useful to examine the relationships between suspects and victims. This has been reported in depth elsewhere,[11] so only the main aspects are considered in this bulletin.

Figure 8 shows the trend in the proportions of suspects falling into the three most common categories of relationship in homicide incidents: family, acquaintance and stranger. As the relationship is unknown where there is no suspect, the data refer only to incidents where the suspect is known.

Figure 8

Percentage of homicide victims
(where suspect is known)

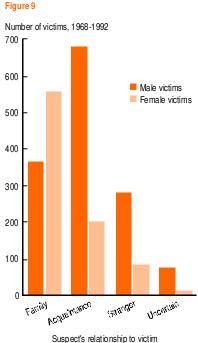Family   Acqaintance   Stranger

As this figure indicates, there are some years when known suspects who were acquaintances exceeded those who were family members, however the proportion who were strangers is consistently the lowest. Although cases where a suspect is unknown may contain a larger proportion of strangers, this would not affect the pattern as the total number of unsolved cases is small.

In most cases of homicide (40.6%), the suspect and victim were members of the same family. In 38.3 per cent of homicides, the suspect was a friend or acquaintance of the victim. Only 16.6 per cent of homicides involved a suspect who was a stranger. There were a few cases (4.5%) where the relationship
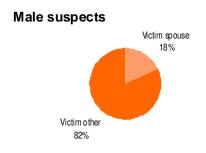
between the accused and the victim was uncertain.

There are gender differences in these relationships. As Figure 9 indicates, women were most likely to be killed by a member of their family, while men were almost twice as likely to be killed by acquaintances/friends as by family members. Men were also more likely than women to be killed by strangers.

Figure 9

Number of victims, 1968-1992

Suspect's relationship to victim

Within family homicides, again there are gender differences. Although in general, homicide victims are more likely to be male than female, in cases where the suspect was known, a greater proportion of female victims (15.4%) than male victims (5.0%) were killed by their spouses. Although the overwhelming majority of offenders were male, a high proportion of female offenders compared with male offenders in spousal incidents suggests that when women do kill, it is likely to be their partners who are the victims. Australian studies suggest family homicides, whether by a male or a female offender, often follow a history of frequent and severe domestic violence,[12] and that a precipitator is the situation where the perpetrator fears losing control of the victim, for example if the abused partner leaves. [13] Figure 10 illustrates the proportions of spousal versus non-spousal homicide, for male and female offenders, for 1968 - 1992.
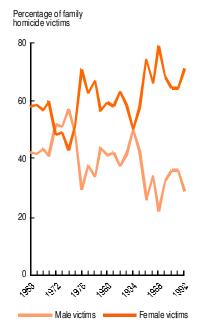
Figure 10

Male suspects

Victim spouse 18%

Victim other 82%

Female suspects

Victim other 48%

Victim spouse 52%

There were no significant upward or downward trends in overall suspect/victim relationships over the period studied. However, considering the victims in family homicide only, there was an increasing trend in the proportion of victims who were female, and a complementary decreasing trend in the proportion of victims who were male, as shown in Figure 11.
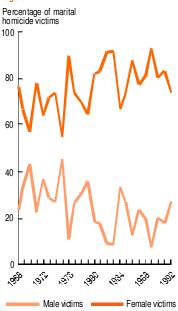
Figure 11

Percentage of family homicide victims

These trends were statistically significant only for the proportions.[14] There were no significant upward or downward trends in the actual **numbers** of male and female victims in family homicide. This pattern is indicative of some variability in the trend for total victims of family homicide, as opposed to a consistently flat or increasing trend.

To provide further insight into these trends in the relative frequencies of male and female victims in family homicides, the data were disaggregated to show the specific relationship between suspect and victim. For those victims killed by a marital partner,[15] there were again significant complementary increasing and decreasing trends in the proportions of female and male victims respectively.[16] This suggests that, while spousal homicides are not increasing in frequency, the percentage of female victims is increasing relative to male victims. Figure 12 shows this trend.

Figure 12

Percentage of marital homicide victims

CHILD VICTIMS

As well as varying by the gender of the victim, the suspect/victim relationship varies according to the age of the victim. Young children were more likely to be killed by family - 195 victims aged under ten years were killed by a family member, which is 81.2 per cent of all victims in that age group. Infants are particularly at risk in such circumstances - 83 (34.6%) were aged under one year. In 72.9 per cent of child homicides (i.e. where the victim was under 10 years), the suspect was a parent. In this victim age group, over the period studied, when a parent was the offender, it was equally

likely to be the mother or the father (47.4 % and 52.6% respectively). While it is of concern, this higher than usual proportion of female offenders is not surprising since the level of interaction, thereby the potential for conflict and stress, is greater between women and children than between men and children.
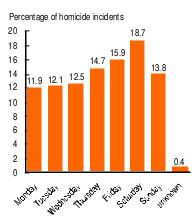
Of the remainder of child victims, 13.8 per cent were killed by an acquaintance, and 4.6 per cent by a stranger. The risk was spread more evenly throughout the age groups in these categories, except that no infant under 2 years was killed by a stranger, probably because they are more likely to be under constant supervision.
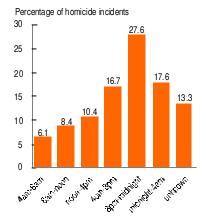
There were no significant upward or downward trends in homicides involving child victims.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INCIDENT

Figure 13 gives an overview of when homicide occurs. Homicide incidents were more likely to occur on a Saturday than any other day of the week. The increase on days leading up to the weekend is also evident. They were also more likely to occur late at night - almost one third of the homicides (27.6%) occurred between 8pm and midnight,
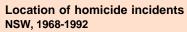
and the frequency was also high on either side of this interval. Family and acquaintance homicides have similar timing patterns, but stranger homicide differs in that it usually occurs in the midnight to 4am interval.[17] The only month in which homicides were slightly more likely to occur was December, with 10.1 per cent of the total.

This pattern has not changed significantly over the period studied, and reflects the tendency for violent incidents to be associated with increased socialising and consumption of alcohol.[18] Weekend nights, as well as the festive season, are particularly associated with entertainment and social drinking, bringing about an increased level of interaction, and greater potential for conflict, both at social venues and within the family.
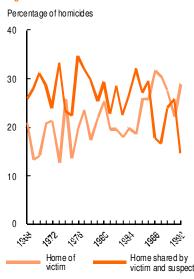
LOCATION

The home is a very common location for homicide. Most homicides occurred at the home of the victim, which was often also the home of the suspect. The table below gives the proportions of incidents occurring in each location. 'Other' includes sporadic locations, such as at sea, on public transport, or at a school.

Figure 13

Percentage of homicide incidents

Percentage of homicide incidents

Location of homicide incidents NSW, 1968-1992

Location	Homicides (%)
Victim's own home	21.6
Home shared by victim and suspect	26.2
Street (including in vehicles)	13.0
Bushland/parks/countryside	10.1
In or around hotels or other licenced premises	8.0
Home of the accused	6.6
Home of another	3.3
Workplace of victim or suspect	3.4
In or around buildings	3.6
Other	2.0
Unknown	2.2
Total	100

Some trends were evident over the period studied, and these are shown in Figure 14. The proportion of homicides occurring in the victim's own home increased significantly,[19] while those taking place at a home shared by the victim and the offender decreased marginally.[20]

Figure 14

Percentage of homicides

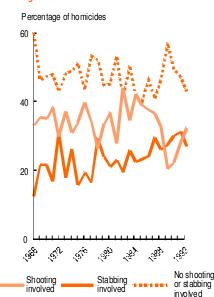Home of victim — Home shared by victim and suspect

The characteristic location of homicide differs according to the victim's gender. While the victim's home was most frequently the location for both genders, the proportion of women killed in this location (65.3%) was much greater than for men (37.7%). Women are usually killed in this location as the result of a family homicide. The location for male victims was much more varied, with high proportions also killed in the street (15.7%) or near hotels and other licensed premises (11.5%). Often such homicides are the result of an altercation.[21]

METHOD

The methods used in committing homicide vary extensively, and include stabbing, shooting, strangling, bashing and poisoning. The most common categories are discussed here. Figure 15 presents trends in the proportion of

Figure 15

Percentage of homicides

Shooting involved — Stabbing involved — No shooting or stabbing involved

homicide victims for whom a specified homicide method was used (regardless of whether that method was used alone or in combination with another method). If more than one method was used, the incident is included in the counts for each method of homicide. For this reason, percentages of the various methods used may total more than 100 per cent.

The two most common methods used in homicides over the 1968 to 1992 period were shooting (33.6% of all victims) and stabbing (23.3%). The remainder (47.4%) were mainly due to bashing, strangling and other less common methods, such as smothering or drowning.

While shooting was the most common method, the use of firearms in homicide is not on the increase. Over the period studied, there was no significant upward or downward trend in the proportion of homicides involving guns.

The second most common method involves the use of knives or other sharp instruments. As Figure 15 shows, the use of this method has increased significantly.[22] For the first three years of the period under review, an average of 18.5 per cent of victims were stabbed, compared with an average of 29.4 per cent over the final three years. The graph shows that this increase has been steady, so it is unlikely to be due to any particular event. It seems more likely that offenders are increasingly using knives, where before they may have used their fists and feet to bash the victim. This latter method decreased significantly over the period, and accounts for a large proportion of incidents not involving shooting or stabbing.

Recent Australian studies of homicide indicate that knives are particularly prevalent in incidents involving female offenders, particularly when the victim is her spouse or partner.[23] Men, in contrast, use guns more frequently. Our data concur with this finding. Over a quarter of female offenders stabbed their victim over the period, and two-thirds of these were family homicides. For male offenders, the figure was around one-fifth, and most involved non-family victims. Given this pattern, it is somewhat surprising that the significant increase in stabbing evident from our data involved only male offenders, as Figure 16 shows.

UNSOLVED HOMICIDES

While in most cases a suspect is apprehended, there are usually some 'unsolved' murders where there is no known suspect. Only 234, or 10.1 per cent of incidents over the period 1968-92, involving 250 victims, fell into this category. However, as Figure 17 shows, there was a significant increase in unsolved cases over the period.[24] The increase appears to have been a steady one, rising from an average rate of 0.09 per 100,000 population between 1968 and 1970, to 0.27 per 100,000 population between 1990 and 1992.

Figure 17
Unsolved homicide incidents per 100,000 population

DISCUSSION

Examination of data on homicide in NSW between 1968 and 1992 indicates that there has been no significant upward or downward trend in the incidence of this crime, no increase in multiple murders,

and no increase in gun-related homicides. There has been no change in the proportions of homicides committed by family members, acquaintances or strangers.

Some trends were evident. There has been an increase in the proportion of women, and a corresponding decrease in the proportion of men, who are victims of spousal homicide. Although there is no significant increase in the *numbers* of victims of marital homicide, this change in the pattern indicates that over the period studied, when an intimate relationship did end in homicide, it became increasingly likely that the woman would be the victim.

There has been a significant reduction in the rate of suspects aged 30-44 years. This cannot be explained in terms of an increase in the number of people in this age group as it is based on an age-specific rate, which takes the population age composition into account. Knife-related homicides by male offenders have increased. There has been an increase in homicide occurring in the victim's own home, and a marginal decrease in those occurring in a home shared by the victim and suspect. No explanations are readily apparent for these changes.

The rate of unsolved homicides has also increased, although the great majority of homicides are still solved by police. This could be due to a decline in the ability of police to solve homicides. However, it could also reflect a natural lag in solving them. Given the fact that it can take several years to solve some homicides, more recently recorded homicides will always include a higher proportion of unsolved cases than those which occurred in earlier years.

Figure 16
Number of homicide incidents involving stabbing

— Male suspects   — Female suspects

NOTES

1   Wallace, A. 1986, *Homicide: the social reality,* NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, Sydney; Bonney, R. 1987, *Homicide 2,* NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, Sydney.

2   NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, 1988, *Homicide,* Crime and Justice Bulletin No. 5, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, Sydney.

3   The data were analysed to identify any significant increasing or decreasing trends over the period. Unless otherwise stated, the test used was Kendall's Rank-order Correlation.

4   Population data for the rate calculations were obtained from the Australian Bureau of Statistics publication series *Estimated Resident Population by Sex and Age: States and Territories of Australia,* Catalogue no. 3201.0, for years 1968 to 1993. All population data were as at 30 June of the particular year.

5   The data were analysed, using a chi-square goodness of fit test, to see whether there was a uniform distribution of multiple-victim incidents over the time period. For this purpose the observed and expected frequencies were compared over five five-year periods.

6   Strang, H. 1993, *Homicides in Australia 1991-92*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.

7   Polk, K. 1993, 'A scenario of masculine violence: confrontational homicide', in Strang, H. and Gerull, S. *Homicide: patterns, prevention and control,* Conference Proceedings Series no. 17, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.

8   Strang, H. 1993, op. cit.

9   NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research data on marital status were unknown for 29.4 per cent of male suspects, and 16.7 per cent of female suspects.

10   Gender was not known in the case of 6 (0.2%) victims.

11   Nguyen Da Huong, M.T. and Salmelainen, P. 1992, *Family, acquaintance and stranger homicide in New South Wales,* NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, Sydney.

12   Matka, E. 1991, *Domestic Violence in NSW,* Crime and Justice Bulletin No. 12, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, Sydney.

13   Easteal, P. 1993, *Killing the Beloved: homicide between adult sexual intimates,* Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.

14   Kendall's τ = 0.388, p < 0.01.

15   This includes spouses and de facto spouses, current and former.

16   Kendall's τ = 0.332, p < 0.05.

17   Nguyen Da Huong and Salmelainen, op. cit.

18   Homel, R. 1993, 'Hot spots for violence: the environment of pubs and clubs', in Strang, H. and Gerull, S. op.cit.

19   Kendall's τ = 0.425, p < 0.01.

20   Kendall's τ = -0.273, p > 0.05.

21   Homel, R. 1993, op. cit.

22   Kendall's τ = 0.477, p < 0.001. As the proportions are based on use of the method with or without other methods, an increase in one method can occur without a corresponding decrease in other methods.

23   Strang, H. 1993, op. cit.; Easteal, P. 1993, op. cit.

24   Kendall's τ = 0.524, p < 0.001.

25   Wallace, A. 1986, op. cit.

Other titles in this series