



Murder in Queensland

Produced by the Research and Co-ordination Division
Criminal Justice Commission

February 1994

Introduction

This paper presents data on all suspected murders recorded by the Queensland Police Service Information Bureau between 1980/81 and 1991/92. Its purpose is to inform the public, policy makers and the media about the nature and extent of murder in Queensland.

The crime of murder has always attracted extensive media coverage and has been the subject of countless movies, television shows and books. Reports of horrific killings, such as the "backpacker murders", the Sydney "granny killings", and the "Hoddle Street Massacre" can dominate the media for days, even weeks, on end. However, the reality of the crime is often different from the picture presented in some sections of the media. The murders which come to public attention account for a relatively small proportion of the killings which are reported to the police. Not surprisingly, those which receive the greatest publicity tend to be the most horrifying and bizarre – the "typical" murder rarely gets much coverage.

The Commission hopes that publication of this Information Paper will help correct popular misconceptions about the nature of murder and promote more informed discussion and debate about appropriate crime prevention strategies. The questions addressed in the paper include:

- What are the costs of murder?
- Is the murder rate in Queensland increasing?
- Who is most at risk of being murdered?
- Who is most likely to commit murder?
- What are the most common ways in which people are murdered?
- When and where is murder most likely to occur?
- What can be done to reduce the incidence of murder?

Definitions

Murder is defined in section 302 of the Queensland Criminal Code. Normally, to establish that a murder has been committed the prosecution must prove that:

- the accused caused the death of the victim; and
- intended to kill, or cause grievous bodily harm to, the victim or some other person.

A person may also be guilty of murder if he or she unintentionally kills someone in the course of committing a crime, provided that a reasonable person would have been aware that the act which caused the death was one likely to endanger human life. An example of such a case is where a person points a loaded firearm at someone when carrying out an armed robbery and discharges the firearm accidentally, thereby killing the other person.

A person who unlawfully kills another under circumstances that fall short of murder is guilty of manslaughter. The offence of manslaughter may be found because the person was grossly negligent, but lacked any intention to kill or cause grievous bodily harm. At common law this situation is sometimes referred to as 'involuntary manslaughter'. Manslaughter may also arise where all the elements of a murder are present, but the accused is able to rely on circumstances which lessen the charge of murder to one of manslaughter. For example, the accused may be able to successfully raise the defence of provocation. At common law this is referred to as 'voluntary manslaughter'.

Scope of the Study

This study covers all recorded killings in Queensland between 1980/81 and 1991/92 which were initially classified as murder by the Queensland Police Service (QPS). It encompasses cases where a suspect was charged with murder, multiple killings classified as 'murder-suicides', and deaths where murder was suspected but no offender could be found. Data were collected on 603 victims and 634 suspects. In 22 cases, only victim data could be obtained as the police had been unable to identify or locate any suspects.

Deaths which were initially categorised as manslaughter by the police were not included in the study, due to police files on these cases not being so accessible. As only five to 12 deaths a year are recorded as manslaughter, apart from deaths caused by dangerous driving, this omission does not significantly affect the findings presented here.

Data Sources

The main sources for this study are police Court Briefs and Criminal Offence Reports. The police prepare a Court Brief (QP9) where a suspect has been charged. In cases where there is evidence that an offence has been committed, but no suspect has been apprehended, the only documentation available is the Criminal Offence Report (QP10).

The Court Brief is the more extensive of the two forms. It contains basic information such as the names of the suspect and the deceased, the place and date of the offence, the suspect's date of birth, the sex of the suspect and the victim, and the method and time of killing. In the description of events surrounding the killing, it is customary for the police to state whether a familial relationship existed between the victim and the suspect, and to indicate what the precipitating factors were. Some of these descriptions are brief; others are detailed and comprehensive.

The data were coded and entered by one person. A sample from each year was checked for consistency in coding and accuracy in data entry.

Study Limitations

Murder is an offence which the public recognises as a serious crime and usually reports. It is also a difficult offence to conceal from the authorities. Hence, police records tend to be more reliable and comprehensive for this type of crime than for many other offences. Nevertheless, it is likely that there were some murders committed in Queensland between 1980/81 and 1991/92 which never became known to the police. These could have included cases of:

- missing persons who were thought to have been murdered but whose bodies were never found
- criminals who had been murdered by their associates and rivals, and whose deaths were successfully concealed

- incidents in which the circumstances and cause of death were suspicious but could not be proved as murder, such as where a "hot shot" of adulterated heroin was substituted for the victim's routine supply, or was forcibly administered (Halloran 1993, p. 133).

A second caveat is that the study relies on police judgements of what constitutes murder. It is clear that police use a more expansive definition of murder than do the courts. A number of killings initially classified as murders are later found to be accidents or cases of manslaughter. Moreover, a substantial proportion of people charged with murder by the police are later found not guilty of the offence. For instance, of the 233 people who appeared in court on a murder charge in Queensland between 1986/87 and 1991/92, 50 per cent were convicted of murder (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1993).

A third limitation is that some of the information recorded in Court Briefs and Criminal Offence Reports depends on the suspect's self-disclosure, which may not always be reliable. Items which police may not be able to verify at the time of the arrest include the suspect's occupation, employment status, and marital status. In addition, the police themselves do not always record relevant information, especially where it relates to victims. For instance, in 47 per cent of the reports examined for this study, it was not possible to determine the exact nature of the relationship between the suspect and the victim. Also, police rarely recorded the age or race of the victim and, even if they do, the information may not necessarily be correct.

Other Relevant Australian Studies

Studies of homicide have been carried out in other Australian jurisdictions using a variety of data sources and methodologies.

Wallace (1986) examined all known homicides coming to the attention of the police in New South Wales between 1968 and 1981. Data were collected from police and court records. The study covered all reported cases of murder, conspiracy to murder, murder-suicide, infanticide, and manslaughter (excluding deaths resulting from road accidents). The study also included unsolved homicides – deaths regarded by the police as murder, but for which no suspect had been apprehended.

The Law Reform Commission of Victoria (1991a, 1991b) collected data on all Victorian homicide prosecutions between 1981 and 1987, excluding prosecutions for culpable driving causing death. This study, the first of its kind in Australia, provided valuable knowledge about how homicide is handled by the police and prosecuting authorities, the legal issues arising at trial, prosecution outcomes, and the pattern of sentences. Data for the study were obtained from Director of Public Prosecutions case files.

Another Victorian study was undertaken by Polk and Ranson in 1991. They carried out a content analysis of 124 case histories, comprising all cases of homicide reported to the Office of the Coroner in 1985 and 1986. The offences covered were murder, manslaughter, child destruction and infanticide.

The most recently published Australian study is that of Strang (1993). Strang has collected data on all reported homicides in Australia since 1989/90, using police records obtained through the national Homicide Monitoring Program at the Australian Institute of Criminology. Her study covers all cases, excluding driving related offences, which resulted in a person being charged with murder or manslaughter, murder-suicides, and deaths classed as homicides by the police, but for which no suspect was apprehended.

Findings from these various studies are referred to at relevant points in the paper.

The Costs of Murder

Although murder is relatively rare, the costs to the community are substantial. These costs include:

- the psychological trauma experienced by family members and friends of victims (and perpetrators)
- high levels of community anxiety
- economic costs.

In relation to economic costs, the Law Reform Commission of Victoria estimated that, in 1988, the quantifiable cost to the community of a murder was approximately \$1 million, excluding investigation, prosecution and trial costs (1991a, p. 15). This estimate took account of the victim's loss of income for the rest of his or her normal life span, the cost of providing for dependants, the accused's foregone income for 15 years in prison, and the cost of keeping the person in prison. The estimate was obtained with the assistance of the Federal Office of Road Safety. Calculations of the victim's and offender's loss of income were based on the fact that the age and gender distribution of murder victims was similar to that of road accident victims.

Murder Trends in Queensland

The most accurate way of analysing crime trends is to take into account changes in population. It would be absurd simply to compare, for example, the number of murders in 1900 with the number recorded in 1990. To ensure comparability over time, researchers usually express crime figures in terms of the rate per 100,000 of the population. 'The risk of being a victim does not change as long as the population keeps pace with the changing crime level' (Matka 1990, p. 4).

It is important to distinguish trends from random year-to-year fluctuations. The occurrence of one incident where a person kills several people on the same occasion – perhaps in a murder-suicide – can inflate the figures for a particular year. A good illustration of this can be found in Victoria which, in 1987/88, experienced a 41 per cent increase over the previous year in the number of recorded murders. When viewed in the context of several years data, it is clear that 1987/88 was atypical. Over half of the increase was accounted for by just two incidents, the Hoddle Street and Queen Street "massacres" (Victorian Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 1992, p. 6).

Figure 1 shows the annual murder rate in Queensland for the years 1980/81 to 1991/92. The rate has varied between 1.38 and 2.52 deaths per 100,000 of the population. The rate in the latter half of the 1980s was generally above that of the first half of the decade but the rate then declined slightly in 1990/91 and 1991/92. Overall, there has been no consistent upward trend in the Queensland murder rate since 1980/81.

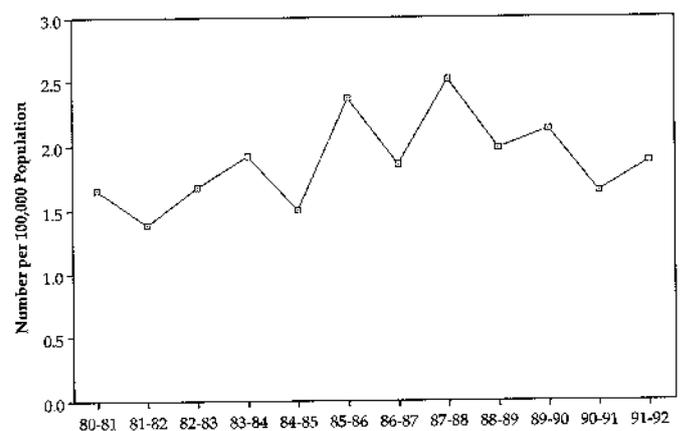


Figure 1: Number of Reported Murders per 100,000 People Queensland (1980/81 to 1991/92)

Source: QPS records.

The relative stability of the murder rate is in contrast to trends for many other reported crimes in Queensland. For instance, the rate of serious assaults reported to the QPS has grown by an average of 12 per cent a year over the last decade (QPS 1993, p. 45). It may be that murder is a special crime that is not as sensitive to the factors that have led to the apparent increase in other forms of violent crime. However, it should be noted that police statistics on assault and other crimes of violence are much more sensitive to changes in the reporting behaviour of victims and the recording practices of police (Victorian Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 1992, p. 7). As noted earlier, because most homicides come to the attention of the police, reported homicide rates may provide a more reliable measure of underlying trends in violent crime than do police statistics for many other offences.

Who Commits Murder?

In this section information about the suspect refers to persons arrested for murder, but not necessarily convicted of murder. For the 12 year period, there were 634 identified suspects. The number of people arrested for murder differs from the actual number of murders committed. This is because some people committed more than one murder and conversely some killings involve more than one suspect.

Gender

Murder is predominantly committed by males against other males. Males accounted for 84.9 per cent of known suspects and 58 per cent of the victims. Conversely, females made up 15.1 per cent of the suspects and 42 per cent of the victims (Figure 2). These proportions are similar to those reported by Wallace (1986) for New South Wales and Strang (1993) for Australia.

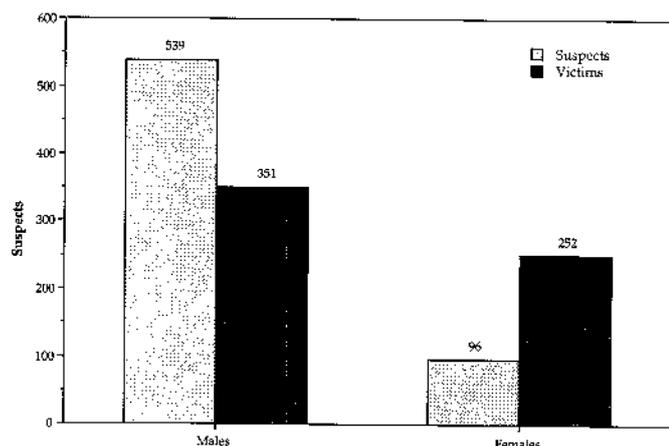


Figure 2: Gender of Murder Suspects and Victims in Queensland (1980/81 to 1991/92)

Source: QPS records.

Of the 96 female suspects, 82.3 per cent killed males and 17.7 per cent killed females. By comparison, 59.4 per cent of the male suspects killed males and 40.6 per cent killed females. Most of the killings of males by females and of females by males occurred in a domestic context.

Age

The median age of suspects at the time they were arrested was 28. The youngest was 13; the oldest was 82.

Marital Status

There were distinct differences in the marital status of male and female suspects. Over half the males were single (55.7%), compared with 30 per cent of females. Female suspects were considerably more likely than males to be married or in de facto relationships. This reflects the fact that most killings by females occur in a domestic context.

Employment Status

Figure 3 shows that 41.6 per cent of suspects were unemployed at the time the offence was committed, while 30.7 per cent were in paid employment. A comparison with official unemployment statistics compiled by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) indicates that the unemployment rate amongst suspects was 6.2 times that for Queensland as a whole. It is possible that the police used a broader definition of 'unemployed' than the ABS. However, even allowing for this factor, the unemployment rate for suspects is clearly well above the State average.

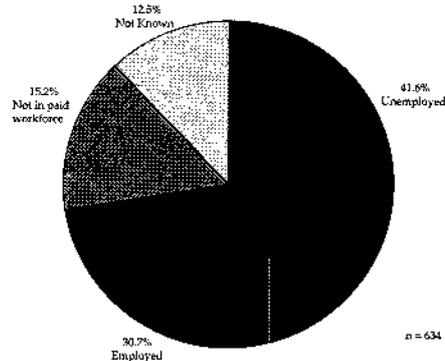


Figure 3: Employment Status: Murder Suspects Queensland (1980/81 to 1991/92)

Source: QPS records.

Racial Background

Twenty-four per cent of murder suspects in the study were recorded as being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background. In the 1991 Census, 2.4 per cent of the Queensland population stated they were of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent. This means that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were over-represented amongst suspects by a factor of 10.

For most killings by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suspects, there was no record of the victim's race. Nevertheless, it is likely that most of these killings were intra-racial, especially as many occurred within rural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Strang, using information from other sources, found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprised 21 per cent of homicide victims in Queensland in 1991/92 (1993, p. 26).

Killings Involving Multiple Perpetrators

Forty-two murders (6.6%) involved more than one perpetrator.

More than half of the killings which involved multiple perpetrators occurred between people who were related, or at least acquainted with each other. In 21.4 per cent of cases, the perpetrator and victim were strangers. Robbery accounted for 30.1 per cent of killings involving multiple perpetrators. There was one case of sexual assault in which two males killed a female. There was one case where four females killed one male.

Three prisoners were killed by multiple perpetrators. One killing occurred in a correctional institution for females; the other two incidents occurred in male prisons.

How is Murder Committed?

Figure 4 shows that assault was the most common method of killing. This category includes kicking, punching, strangulation, and use of a blunt instrument. Shooting was the next most frequently used method, accounting for 29.3 per cent of killings. Knives and other sharp instruments accounted for 25.4 per cent of murders. The category of 'other' includes killings by drowning, setting alight, and drug overdoses.

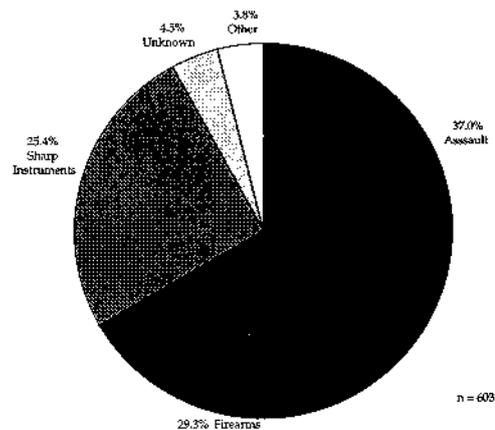


Figure 4: Method of Killing Queensland (1980/81 to 1991/92)

Source: QPS records.

These findings are broadly comparable with those from other Australian jurisdictions. For instance, Strang found that, in 1991/92, assault accounted for 39 per cent of all Australian homicides, knives for 28 per cent, and firearms for 22 per cent (1993, p. 16).

Men and women tended to use different methods of killing. Seventy-eight per cent of women resorted to a weapon, most commonly a sharp instrument. In comparison, 50 per cent of men used a weapon, usually a firearm.

How a person was killed also partly depended on where he or she was killed. Of those killed in 'other rural localities', such as farms and bushland, firearms accounted for the majority of deaths (53.1%). Firearms were also the most common cause of death in country towns (47.8%). By contrast, firearms were used infrequently in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (8.2%) and in the Brisbane inner city (6.3%). In these latter localities, sharp instruments and assaults accounted for the majority of deaths. In Brisbane inner city, 66.7 per cent of victims met their deaths by assault; in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the proportion killed by this method was 72.1 per cent. In suburban Brisbane, firearms and sharp instruments were the main methods used.

The fact that firearm killings were more common in rural areas may be due to the greater availability of weapons in these areas. In New South Wales, the proportion of homicides involving firearms was found to be 60 per cent higher in rural than in urban areas (Wallace 1986, p. 65). Wallace attributed this to a much greater rate of firearms ownership in rural areas.

Characteristics of Victims

When a murder is committed, the efforts of the police are directed towards apprehending and arresting the suspect. Consequently, information which police record about the suspect is normally much more detailed than that about the victim.

Gender

As indicated, 42 per cent of murder victims were female, although women accounted for 14.6 per cent of suspects.

Female murder victims were most likely to be killed by their sexual partners. Thirty-nine per cent of women victims were killed by a sexual partner or former sexual partner, compared with 13 per cent of men killed. Women were considerably less likely than men to be killed by an acquaintance or a stranger.

Age

Child murders were the only cases where police consistently recorded the age of the victim. There were 51 recorded killings of children under 16. Twenty of these deaths were of children aged two and under (Table 1).

Table 1: Age of Child Murder Victims Queensland (1980/81 to 1991/92)

| Age of Victim | No. of Victims | Per cent of total |
|---------------|----------------|-------------------|
| Under 1 | 9 | 17.6 |
| 1 - 2 | 11 | 21.6 |
| 3 - 4 | 5 | 9.8 |
| 5 - 6 | 3 | 5.9 |
| 7 - 8 | 1 | 2.0 |
| 9 - 10 | 2 | 3.9 |
| 11 - 12 | 8 | 15.7 |
| 13 - 14 | 3 | 5.9 |
| 15 - 16 | 9 | 17.6 |
| Total | 51 | 100.0 |

Note: Does not include deaths due to neglect, malnutrition, or inadequate health care.

Source: QPS records

Relationship of Victim to Suspect

In the majority of murders, the victim and suspect knew each other (see Table 2). Intra-family killings accounted for 35.5 per cent of all murders. The next most common relationships were between friends, acquaintances, and persons otherwise known to each other in some way (31.9%).

Table 2 shows that killings by strangers accounted for seven per cent of all murders. However, it is likely that the real number of stranger killings was substantially higher. In 25.7 per cent of the files examined, it was impossible to tell from the available documentation whether or not the suspect was known to the victim. It is probable that a considerable number of these cases were stranger killings. Other Australian researchers who have had access to more complete records have reported a higher proportion of stranger killings. For example, Wallace in her New South Wales study found that 18 per cent of homicides "solved" by the police were stranger killings (1986, p. 73). In the Victorian Law Reform Commission study, 29 per cent of homicide prosecutions involved stranger killings (1991b, p. 18).

Table 2: Relationship of Murder Victim to Suspect Queensland (1980/81 to 1991/92)

| Victim's Relationship to Suspect | No. of victims | Per cent of total ¹ |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------|
| Intra-family: | | |
| Spouse, ex-spouse, de facto | 141 | 23.4 |
| Child, step-child | 36 | 6.0 |
| Parent | 17 | 2.8 |
| Sibling, other family member | 20 | 3.3 |
| Otherwise known: | | |
| Sexual rivals | 6 | 1.0 |
| Friend/acquaintance ² | 57 | 9.5 |
| Relationship unclear ² | 129 | 21.4 |
| Stranger | 42 | 7.0 |
| Not known | 155 | 25.7 |
| Total | 603 | 100.0 |

- Notes: 1. The category of 'friend/acquaintance' includes short and long-term acquaintances, sex-worker client relationships, business relationships, homosexuals, prisoners, and gang members.
2. 'Relationship unclear' means that police records indicated only that the suspect and victim were known to each other in some unspecified way.

Source: QPS records.

Intra-Family Killings: An Overview

The category of intra-family killings covers persons in a spousal or family relationship. At the time the killing took place, the parties may have been living together or apart.

As noted, about 35 per cent of all murders occurred within the family. Of these, more than half occurred between spouses (see Figure 5). The next most common category was killings where the victim was a child or step-child of the suspect.

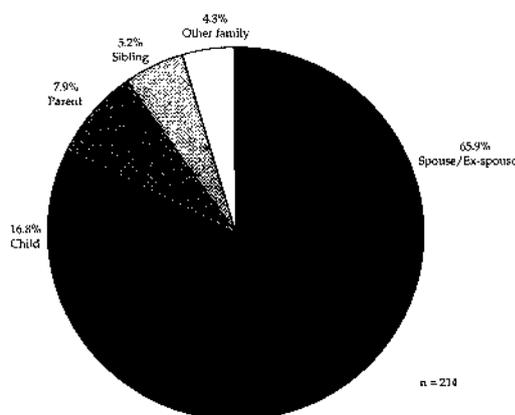


Figure 5: Intra-Family Murders: Relationship of Victim to Suspect Queensland (1980/81 to 1991/92)

Source: QPS records.

Spousal Killings

Spouses were classified as sexual partners or former sexual partners who were either living together or separated. In two-thirds of spousal killings, males killed females. Suspects' ages ranged from 17 to 78.

Half of the female spouse victims were killed by assault; whereas, 80 per cent of male spouse victims were killed by a weapon of some kind. This difference in the cause of death is probably attributable to the greater physical strength of men.

A striking feature of spousal killings was that 18.4 per cent of all such killings occurred in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities despite a very small proportion of the total population living in these communities. Spousal murders accounted for 42.6 per cent of the murders which occurred in rural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Past Violence

The *Domestic Violence Family Protection Act 1987* was proclaimed in August 1989. A search of the Domestic Violence Index held by the QPS was carried out to ascertain the number of cases in which the victim had taken out a protection order against a suspect. Thirteen spouse killings occurred between September 1989 and June 1992. In three of these cases the index recorded that the victims had taken out protection orders against the suspect. In two of these cases the protection order had expired by the time the killing took place. It is likely that in some other cases there was a history of violence, even though no order was taken out. In addition, it appears that not every case with an existing protection order is recorded on the Domestic Violence Index.

Child Killings

As indicated earlier, 51 victims in the study were under the age of 16. Men were suspected as being responsible for 38 (74.5%) of these deaths and women for 11 (21.6%). In another two cases the gender of the suspect had not been recorded. When women killed, they were most likely to kill children under one year of age (Table 3). Women offenders accounted for five of the 11 deaths of children under the age of one. This pattern is consistent with a British Home Office study, which found that almost half the killings of victims under the age of one were committed by the child's mother (Morris & Wilcznski 1993). For all other age categories, the perpetrator was much more likely to be a male.

Table 3: Age of Child Murder Victim by Gender of Suspect Queensland (1980/81 to 1991/92)

| Age of Victim | Gender of Suspect | |
|---------------|-------------------|-----------|
| | MALE | FEMALE |
| Under 1 | 4 | 5 |
| 1 - 2 | 8 | 3 |
| 3 - 4 | 4 | 1 |
| 5 - 6 | 3 | 0 |
| 7 - 8 | 1 | 0 |
| 9 - 10 | 2 | 0 |
| 11 - 12 | 7 | 1 |
| 13 - 14 | 2 | 1 |
| 15 - 16 | 7 | 0 |
| Total | 38 | 11 |

Notes: There were two 15 year olds whose killers were unidentified.

Source: QPS records.

Table 4 below shows that over two-thirds of children were killed by people known to them, and that 61 per cent were killed by a parent. There were three identified cases of children being killed by strangers; although some of the cases where relationship was recorded as 'unknown' may also have been stranger killings. In 17 cases, police records indicated that the killings had occurred in the context of a generally abusive situation.

Table 4: Relationship of Suspect to Child Murder Victim Queensland (1980/81 to 1991/92)

| Relationship of Suspect to Child Victim | No. of victims | Per cent of victims |
|---|----------------|---------------------|
| Custodial Natural Parent | 20 | 39.2 |
| De facto Parent | 4 | 7.8 |
| Other Parent | 7 | 13.7 |
| Stranger | 3 | 5.9 |
| Known to child but relationship unclear | 6 | 11.8 |
| Friend | 3 | 5.9 |
| Unknown | 8 | 15.7 |
| Total | 51 | 100.0 |

- Notes: 1. A child is a person aged 16 and under.
 2. Other parent includes non-custodial natural parent, married partner, boyfriend of partner, step-parent and foster-parent.
 3. Friend includes boyfriend/girlfriend of victim.

Source: QPS records.

Parent Killings

In the 12 year period covered by the study, there were 17 cases where natural, legal or de facto parents were killed by their children. These accounted for 7.9 per cent of intra-family killings. Fathers were killed more often than mothers: 13 fathers died at the hands of their offspring compared with four mothers. Sons killed fathers in 12 (70.6%) of the parent killings.

The youngest suspect who killed a parent was 15, and the oldest was 42.

Sibling Killings

There were 11 incidents in which the victim and offender were siblings. These accounted for 5.2 per cent of intra-family killings (Figure 5). Violence on the part of siblings appears to be mainly a male phenomenon. In seven instances, the victim and suspect were brothers. There were two cases of a brother killing a sister, and two cases of a sister killing a brother.

Murder-Suicides

Of the 634 identified suspects, 29 (4.6%) killed themselves immediately after killing their victims. These 29 suspects were responsible for killing a total of 46 victims. All but one of the suspects in this group were men. Typically, the persons killed in murder-suicides were spouses, sexual intimates and children.

The method of killing employed by suspects in most murder-suicides was shooting (65.5%). In the only case where a female was the suspect, she killed herself and her children by carbon monoxide poisoning.

Between 1980/81 and 1983/84 there was one reported case of murder-suicide. From 1984/85 to 1991/92, between two to five incidents a year took place. However, the numbers are too small to draw any inference that murder-suicide is increasing in Queensland.

In the New South Wales study, Wallace found that eight per cent of homicide offenders in the sample killed themselves (1986, p. 162). This is above the Queensland rate. However, it is possible there could have been slight differences between the jurisdictions in the way these events were classified.

When are Murders Committed?

Murders were most often committed between 6.00 p.m. and midnight. The fewest number of killings occurred between 6.00 a.m. and noon (Figure 6). For one in five murders, it was impossible to determine the time of death to within six hours.

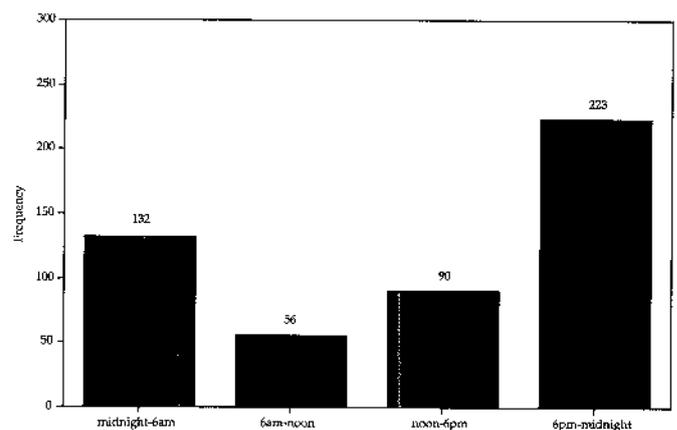


Figure 6: Time of Day when Murders Committed Queensland (1980/81 to 1991/92)

Note: Figure excludes cases where time of death could not be determined.

Source: QPS records.

Figure 7 displays the number of killings by month. It can be seen that there is a degree of seasonality, with December and January being the months with the highest numbers of killings. Factors which could explain this include:

- These months are generally holiday periods when people tend to interact more frequently. In particular, family members are likely to spend more time with each other.
- During warmer weather more alcohol is likely to be consumed. This applies especially to holiday periods such as Christmas and New Year.

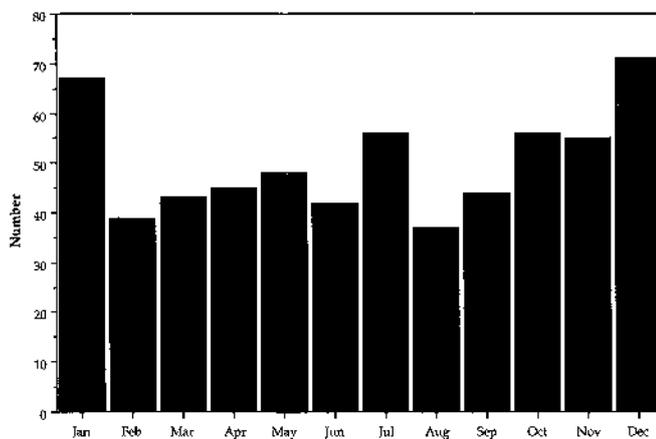


Figure 7: Months when Murders Committed Queensland (1980/81 to 1991/92)

Source: QPS records.

Policy Issues

As pointed out at the beginning of this paper, statistically, murder is a rare crime. Moreover, numerous studies have shown that many murders are committed in the heat of the moment, in circumstances which are hard to predict. These features of the offence make it difficult to devise effective prevention strategies. However, there are some useful lessons to be drawn from the present study, and from other research on homicide which has been undertaken in Australia and elsewhere.

The Role of Socio-Economic Factors

The research reported here confirms that people from economically disadvantaged groups are more likely than the general population to be involved in murders, both as perpetrators and as victims. For instance, a very large proportion of murder suspects were unemployed at the time of the offence. Also, the murder rate amongst the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is much higher than the rate for Queensland as a whole. By virtually any measure, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the most economically and socially disadvantaged sector of Australian society.

Interestingly, the murder rate in Queensland and other Australian jurisdictions has not increased over the last few years, despite the fact that Australia has been in the grips of a substantial recession. Hence, claims that economic disadvantage directly causes crime need to be treated with some caution. However, the two factors are certainly linked. One possible explanation is that poverty and lack of job opportunities contribute to stress, anger, and despair, which in turn may make people more likely to "lash out" at those around them. Where domestic killings are concerned:

economic pressures may . . . limit options, such as leaving the relationship, and restrict access to counselling and mediation services. The fact that such people are forced to spend more time together in the home in a time of stress may [also] be a contributing factor to the eventual homicide (Law Reform Commission of Victoria 1991a, p. 19).

In addition, Polk (1993) has argued that males at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder feel unable to carry out traditional male roles because they are denied access to economic resources. This may lead them to turn to violence as a way of expressing their masculinity.

Issues of causation aside, it is clear that those who are economically disadvantaged are considerably more at risk of being murdered than are the general population. Policy makers need to take account of this fact and tailor their policies accordingly.

Firearms

It appears that the number of gun-related murders is related to the ease with which people can gain access to firearms. As noted, the percentage of gun-related murders is significantly higher in country areas than in Brisbane. This may be attributable to the greater availability of firearms in rural areas. Other studies in Australia and overseas provide clear evidence of a relationship between the incidence of murder and firearm availability (Wallace 1986; Zimring and Hawkins 1987; Sherman 1993). In the United States, which has a murder rate approximately six times higher than that of Queensland, firearms account for 70 per cent of all murders (FBI 1993, p. 18). By contrast, in Queensland, where gun laws are much more restrictive, firearms account for 29 per cent of murders.

Even if private possession of firearms were prohibited, many murders would continue to be committed. Around 70 per cent of the murders examined in this study were committed without the aid of a firearm. It is also probably true that very determined killers will either get access to a firearm, or find other ways to kill. However, strict controls ought to make some difference. Firearms are much more effective weapons than knives or fists. They require much less physical strength on the part of the user and inflict more serious wounds. In addition, many murders, particularly of family members, friends,

and acquaintances, are committed in the heat of the moment and often when the perpetrator has been affected by alcohol. 'Had a gun not been at hand, there may have been time for passions to cool. If another weapon had been used, death would have been much less likely' (Law Reform Commission of Victoria 1991a, p. 17).

Family Violence

As indicated, around 35 per cent of all murders occur within the family with women and young children being the most likely victims. Research from other jurisdictions indicates that, in a large proportion of domestic homicides, there was a history of violence (Law Reform Commission of Victoria 1991a, pp. 18-19; Wallace 1986, p. 97). Information about past violence could not be systematically collected for the present study. However, it was established that three of the women killed since 1989 had previously obtained protection orders against violent partners. In 17 of the 51 child murders recorded, police documents indicated that the killing had occurred in the context of a generally abusive situation.

A number of strategies are available for reducing the incidence of family violence and child abuse. Many of these initiatives have already been adopted in Queensland. Recent amendments to the *Domestic Violence (Family Protection) Act 1992* have provided for the extension of protection orders to persons other than the spouse, and for the confiscation of weapons. The recent amendments to the Act were preceded by a comprehensive education campaign aimed at courts, police, refuge workers and community service providers throughout the State. A special feature was a separate domestic violence prevention program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Similarly, education and public awareness programs aimed at prevention and intervention in child abuse have been conducted. It is to be hoped that, over time, these initiatives will have some impact on the incidence of family violence in the community, and hence the number of intra-family killings.

The Role of Alcohol

Due to the lack of detail in QPS records, it was not possible to collect data on alcohol involvement for the purposes of this study. However, other studies have established that often both the suspect and the victim were under the influence of alcohol when the killing occurred. For example, Wallace found that alcohol was present in 42 per cent of homicide incidents in New South Wales. In 27 per cent of incidents, both the suspect and the victim had been drinking (1986, p. 67). The Law Reform Commission of Victoria, in its study of homicide prosecutions, found that 48 per cent of offenders and 39 per cent of victims had been drinking (1991a, p. 18).

The relationship between alcohol and violent behaviour is undoubtedly complex. Many people drink without becoming violent. Conversely, some people who commit crimes while under the influence of alcohol might well have behaved the same way even if they had been sober. However, there is growing evidence that excessive alcohol consumption does contribute to criminal violence (White and Humeniuk, 1993). This research highlights the need to promote more responsible patterns of drinking in the community.

Conclusions

This study has looked at all cases of suspected murder recorded by the QPS during the period 1980/81 to 1991/92. The key findings of the study are as follows:

- Between 1980/81 and 1991/92 the number of murders recorded by the QPS varied between 1.38 and 2.52 per 100,000 of the population. There is no evidence of a consistent upward trend in the murder rate.
- Murder is an offence mainly committed by men. Men also comprise the majority of victims.
- In the great majority of murders committed in Queensland, the victim and suspect know each other.
- Around 35 per cent of all murders occur within the family. Women and children are the most likely victims of intra-family killings.
- People from economically disadvantaged groups are more likely to be involved in murder, both as perpetrators and victims. Forty-one per cent of suspects were unemployed at the time the offence was committed. The unemployment rate for suspects was around six times that for the Queensland population as a whole.
- About one in four murder suspects were identified by the police as being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent. On these figures, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are about 10 times more likely than the general population to be involved in a murder. The incidence of spousal murder in rural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is particularly high by comparison with the State as a whole.
- Overall, assault is the most common method of killing, followed by firearms and sharp instruments. However, in rural areas firearms account for around half of all murders.

These findings are broadly consistent with those of other Australian studies of homicide. It is hoped that the research reported here, and in other studies, will help correct popular misconceptions about the nature of murder and assist in the development of appropriate crime prevention strategies.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics 1993, *Law and Order in Queensland 1991-92*, Cat. No. 4502.3
- Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) 1993, *Crime in the United States 1992*, Uniform Crime Reports, Washington, US Department of Justice.
- Halloran, P. 1993, 'The Police Perspective' in Strang, H. and Gerull, S.A. 1993, *Homicide: Patterns, Prevention and Control*, Canberra, Australian Institute of Criminology.
- Kapardis, A. 1993, 'Killed by a Stranger in Victoria, January 1990 - April 1992: Location, Victims' Ages and Risk' in Strang, H. and Gerull S.A. 1993, *Homicide: Patterns, Prevention and Control*, Canberra, Australian Institute of Criminology.
- Law Reform Commission of Victoria 1991a, *Homicide*, Report No. 40, Melbourne.
- 1991b, *Homicide Prosecutions Study*, Report No. 40, Melbourne.
- Matka, E. 1990, 'Uses and Abuses of Crime Statistics', *Crime and Justice Bulletin*, Sydney, NSW, Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.
- Morris, A. and Wilczynski, A. 'Rocking the Cradle: Mothers Who Kill The Children' in Birch, H. 1993, *Moving Targets: Women, Murder and Representation*, London, Virago Press.
- Mukherjee, S. and Dagger, D. 1990, *The Size of the Crime Problem in Australia*, 2nd ed., Canberra, Australian Institute of Criminology.
- Polk, K. 1993, 'A Scenario of Masculine Violence: Confrontational Homicide' in Strang, H. and Gerull, S.A. 1993, *Homicide: Patterns, Prevention and Control*, Canberra, Australian Institute of Criminology.
- Polk, K. and Ranson, D., 'Patterns of Homicide in Victoria' in Chappell, D., Grabosky, P. and Strang, H. (eds) 1991, *Australian Violence: Contemporary Perspectives*, Canberra, Australian Institute of Criminology.
- Queensland Police Service 1993, *Statistical Review 1992-1993*, Brisbane, QPS.
- Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody 1991, *Report*, Canberra, AGPS.
- Sherman, L. 1993 'Preventing Homicide Through Trial and Error' in Strang, H. and Gerull, S.A. 1993, *Homicide: Patterns, Prevention and Control*, Canberra, Australian Institute of Criminology.
- Strang, H. 1993, *Homicides in Australia 1991-92*, Canberra, Australian Institute of Criminology.
- Victorian Bureau of Crime and Statistics and Research 1992, *Understanding Crime Statistics*, Bulletin Number 1.
- Wallace, A. 1986, *Homicide: the Social Reality*, Research Study No. 5, Sydney, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.
- White, J. and Humeniuk, R. 1993, *Alcohol Misuse and Violence: Exploring the Relationship*, Australia, Department of Health, Housing, Local Government and Community Services.
- Zimring, F. and Hawkins, G. 1987, *The Citizens Guide to Gun Control*, New York, MacMillan.

Acknowledgments

Anne Philtrip of the Research and Co-ordination Division was primarily responsible for preparing this report. Avril Alley assisted in data collection and Jon Moore undertook much of the data analysis. Megan Atterton and Tracey Stenzel were responsible for word processing and desktop publishing.

© Criminal Justice Commission, 1994.

Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the COPYRIGHT ACT, no part may be reproduced by any process without permission. Inquiries should be made to the publisher Criminal Justice Commission (Queensland).

ISSN 1321-6783

Printed by GOPRINT, Brisbane.
