Filicide in Australia: A national study

A M Tomison¹, T Brown², D Tyson³, W Bryant⁴, S Lyneham⁴, S Bricknell⁴ & P Fernandez Arias²

1. Australian Catholic University
2. Monash University
3. Deakin University
4. Australian Institute of Criminology

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Contact: adam.tomison@iinet.net.au
Child deaths

- Child homicides constitute a very small proportion of all child deaths in Australia – less than 3% of all child deaths.

- More common causes of child deaths include diseases and morbid conditions, transport accidents and suicide.

**Filicide is:** the non-accidental killing of a child or children by a parent or equivalent guardian (defacto parent/step-parent/grandparent/aunt uncle). It includes a number of sub-categories, such as infanticide and familicide (killing of a spouse and children).
The Australian Institute of Criminology has maintained a National Homicide Monitoring program for over 20 years, with data available from 1989/90 to the present.

Uses coronial findings, police and criminal court data, and media reports to identify and capture all homicides and manslaughter offences committed in Australia.

This study assessed filicides for the period 2000-2012.

The broad filicide case data captured under NHMP monitoring was combined with more detailed case assessments carried out for a filicide sample in the state of Victoria by Monash University (Brown, Tyson & Fernandez, 2014) to provide a greater depth of understanding of these cases.
National Homicide Monitoring data

- 238 incidents of filicide involving 284 victims and 260 offenders between 2000-01 and 2011-12:
  - 8 to 29 filicide incidents each year, average of 20 per year
  - 7% (238 of 3,296) of all homicide incidents in Australia involved a child victim (from birth to 17 years)
  - 7% of filicide incidents (n=16) also involved the killing of the offender’s current or former intimate partner (familicide)
  - Filicides constituted 18% (328 of 1,356) of domestic homicide incidents
  - 13% of all known victims (916 of 7,217) were aged under 18 years.
- Typically around 15% of child homicides involve children known to statutory child protection services
- The rate of filicides has remained stable while the rates of domestic homicides decreased (-13%), as did homicides in total (-20%)
Filicide, domestic homicide and homicide incidents, 2000–01 to 2011–12
The victims

- Victim were aged from <12 months to 33 years, with a median age of two years. Only 10 victims were 18 years of age or older (4%).

- Two-thirds of victims were aged less than five years of age (n=189; 67%).

- Consistent with prior Australian research (see Brown, Tyson & Fernandez-Arias 2014; Kirkwood 2012), males (n=158; 56%) were more likely than females (n=125; 44%) to be the victim of a filicide; however this difference was not significant.

- 10% of filicide victims (n=29) were identified as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person. Of these, 18 were male (62%) and 10 were female (34%; sex was unknown for one victim). The rate of filicide for Indigenous children was 2-8 times higher than for non-Indigenous children.
The victims cont…

- Male victims were more likely to be aged between 12 months and 9 years

- Female victims were more likely to be under 12 months or between 10 and 14 years; adult children too few to identify gender differences

- Most common causes of death: beating (24%), strangulation (14%), stabbing (12%), drowning (10%), poisoning (8%), shaken baby syndrome (8%), gunshot (6%), neglect (5%)

- Fathers were more likely to kill by beating (35%) and mothers by strangulation (20%)

- Youngest victims (<4 years old) statistically more likely to be shaken or beaten, victims between 5-9 years of age more likely to die as a result of poisoning/injection (n=9; 20%); victims 10 to 14 years of age were more likely to die as a result of stab wounds (n=10; 34 %), while victims 15+ years old more likely to be shot or stabbed.
Who kills children? The victim-offender relationship

- Fathers and father figures
  - Fatal child abuse - assaults
  - Divorce and custody matters
    - Homicide-suicide
    - Familicides
  - 19% of perpetrators were separated from the other parent of the child, a much lower proportion than in the Monash study of Victorian filicides

- Mothers
  - Mental illness and young children

- The risks for adolescents – increased risk from peers and acquaintances as filicide risk decreases
## Apparent offender motives

*Table 4 Apparent motive in filicide incidents by victims and incidents, 2000–01 to 2011–12*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motive</th>
<th>Victims</th>
<th>Incidents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Argument of a domestic nature</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenge/jealousy</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desertion/termination</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offender apparently delusional</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol related argument/other argument</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual gratification</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevent victim testifying against offender</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Offenders

- N=260 filicide offenders.
- Almost all filicide incidents involved a single offender (n=216; 91%), with 22 incidents involving two offenders (9%).
- Some 52% of perpetrators were male and 48% were female.
- Mothers killed 133 children; Fathers killed 109; Step fathers killed 41 children.
- The identity of secondary offenders extended beyond the other partner, as in the Victorian research, to step fathers.
- Some 9% of offenders were of Indigenous background, and were most commonly male (62%) - 3 times over-representation as perpetrators.
- Age range from 17 to 75 years, with average age of 32 years.
Risk factors

- UK research (Pritchard, Davey, Williams, 2013) has shown filicide is not linked to poverty – although there were high rates of unemployment in the current study.

- Australian and Canadian research (e.g., Brown, Tyson, and Fernandez, 2014, Dawson, 2015) shows the particular stresses (and interaction of stresses) lead to increased risk. Typically found:
  - Mental illness
  - Separation of Parents
  - Domestic Violence
  - Child Abuse
  - Substance Abuse
Risks (2)

- 42% had a criminal history; 3% were on bail, parole or probation – much higher proportion than offenders who killed adults (approx 20%). 54% of male offenders c/f 30% female offenders

- 74% of stepfathers had a criminal history

- Most common offense for males was physical assault and for women drug offenses;

- 20% of both males and females had previous convictions for assault. There was a prior history of committing domestic violence on a current or former partner in 1/3 of filicides

- Intervening early and effectively in the criminal careers of violent perpetrators may therefore prove an effective strategy in reducing child homicide.
Risks (3)

- Mental illness identified in 32% of primary offenders (n=75 of 234); 52% of women offenders reported to be suffering from mental illness.

- Mental illness was less commonly identified than in previous research but the definition was narrower in NHMP.

- Alcohol (15%) or drugs (23%) was reported to be present in the 175 cases for which data was available.

- One-third of incidents (n=57; 30%) there was a known history of domestic violence between the offender and a current or former intimate partner. Offender history of domestic violence was more prevalent for children killed by a step-parent (n=15; 45%) followed by a non-custodial parent (n=9; 41%).
1. Fatal child abuse

• The role of child deaths as system reform driver
  • The 'canary in the mine' or outlier cases?

• Prevention:
  • Alcohol-drugs, mental health concerns, domestic violence
  • Lack of Support Services was identified as a factor, as in Chilean research (Rodriguez Manriquez, 2013)
    • Better identification and assessment of serious risk?
    • Child focused adult services   How much is possible?

• Early intervention under a public health model
  • Mental health assessments and the importance of supports for new mothers

• Support and assessment of blended families, particularly once identified as ‘at risk’
2. Child deaths in context of domestic violence and/or marital dissolution

- Better assessments of (male) parents and risks for violence (self-harm and externally-directed violence)

- Intimate partner violence
  - Intervening effectively earlier in the criminal careers of violent perpetrators may prove an effective strategy in reducing child homicide.

- At time of marriage separation or dissolution and custody matters
  - Role of the Family Court – increased focus on the rights of the child to safety rather than right to parental contact
  - Better coordination of information between child protection and family court systems

‘Safe at Home’ - holistic, integrated intervention models