

statistical report

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gun and knife attacks

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Gun and Knife Attacks

In the field of crime prevention, few goals are more attractive than a reduction in the number of violent killings. The belief that such a goal could be attained if guns were less readily available, is one of the major arguments advanced in support of stricter gun control laws.

So strong is our emotional commitment to reducing the number of criminal homicides (murder, infanticide, manslaughter)* that we are perhaps in danger of ignoring relevant facts or, at least, failing to think through some relevant questions. For example, will a person who wants to kill be deterred by the unavailability of a gun? Won't he merely select an equally effective weapon with which to accomplish his goal?

The present report is an attempt to 'figure out' some of the probable consequences of stricter gun control using the best available statistical information. The success of this process depends both on the imaginativeness of the questions asked and the quality of the factual material available to answer them. So far as the questions are concerned, the paper's indebtedness to Zimring's analysis of criminal homicides and serious criminal assaults in Chicago, should be frankly acknowledged at the outset.⁽¹⁾ With respect to the statistical information that is available, the compilation of criminal statistics and their analysis for the purpose of informing social policy, regrettably is still in an early stage of development in Australia. The New South Wales Police Department has made a start in this field. The Department's 'crime information reports' (supplemented by court records) can be used in an attempt to answer important questions concerning fatal and non-fatal assaults. At the same time it is possible to illustrate the need for greater refinement in criminal statistics if they are to play a positive role in informing social policy.

A Question of Intent

It has already been suggested that a person bent on killing someone may not be deterred by the unavailability of a particular weapon, namely, a gun. But to say that he will seek out another lethal weapon to accomplish his goal involves an assumption which may or may not be supported by the facts.

Doubtless a number of homicides result from a single-minded intention on the assailant's part to do away with his victim. The basic question is whether a significant proportion of homicides result from a less deliberate and determined intention; "If this question can be answered in the affirmative, and if the probable substitute for firearms in those situations is less likely to lead to death, then the elimination of guns would reduce the number of homicides"⁽²⁾

Short of mental telepathy, there is no way in which we can establish precisely the intention of an assailant to kill or simply impose physical injury on his victim. Nevertheless, it is possible to use crime statistics in a way which at least throws light on the extent to which homicides results from an ambiguous rather than a single-minded intention to kill.

* In this study, 'manslaughter' excludes manslaughter offences involving motor vehicles.

(1) Zimring, F; "Is gun control likely to reduce violent killings?" The University of Chicago Law Review Vol. 35 pp. 721/737.

(2) Ibid, p.722.

First there is the question of the relationship between the attacker and victim. The mental picture which most Australians have of violent crime tends to be based on the more widely publicised accounts of sudden unprovoked attacks by strangers. Data on homicides committed in New South Wales during 1972 enables us to see just how atypical this picture is of the relationship between victim and attacker:

**Table I - Relationship between Homicide Victim and Attacker:
N.S.W. 1972**

Relationship	Percentage
Friends and acquaintances	39.0
Spouse or lover	18.3
Other family	15.9
Neighbours	7.3
No prior relationship	13.4
Undetermined	6.1
Total	100.0

Number of cases...82.

Four out of five (80.5 per cent) of all killings involved friends, spouse, lovers, family members or neighbours. This finding closely resembles the results of Zimring's Chicago study.

Motive

Next it is possible to extend the question of relationship to include consideration of the police nominated motive for homicides occurring in New South Wales. Two-thirds (65.8 per cent) of the homicides resulted from altercations, especially domestic conflict, clashes over money, sex, liquor, children and romantic entanglements - 'Precisely the situations where the intention is more apt to be ambiguous than single-minded'.

**Table II - Motives of Homicides as Established by Police:
N.S.W. 1972**

	Number	Percentage
General domestic	25	30.5
Money	3	3.6
Liquor	1	1.2
Sex	5	6.1
Triangle	4	4.9
Children	1	1.2
Other Altercations	17	20.7
ALTERCATIONS		
ROBBERY	3	3.7
GANG DISPUTES	3	3.7
'HORSEPLAY'	2	2.4
OTHER	9	11.0
NOT KNOWN	9	11.0
	82	100.0

Alcohol

Alcohol is another factor which can blur the intentions as well as the accuracy of an assailant. The police are, of course, not always able to report on the sobriety or otherwise of an offender. They were able to record an opinion in almost half (47.7 per cent) of the serious* and fatal assault cases which occurred in 1972. It was stated that 62 per cent of attackers in 'serious' assaults and 69 per cent of those responsible for homicides were at least partly affected by alcohol.

Even where a gun is used in a fatal assault, the destructive intent of the attacker is not always as clearcut as the choice of weapon would seem to imply. For example, only one in three (35.7 per cent) of the victims of fatal gun attacks in New South Wales (30 per cent in Chicago) were wounded by more than one shot. A single weapon was used in five of the twenty-eight fatal gun shot cases in New South Wales and the multiple shot capacity of the remaining weapons is known to have been exhausted in only one case. However, it should be noted that the evidence on this point was unclear in six cases. The types of guns involved, are detailed in Appendix A.

- * The serious assault category included the following offences: shoot with intent to murder, attempt murder, wound with intent to do grievous bodily harm, wound with intent to prevent lawful apprehension, shoot with intent to do grievous bodily harm, shoot with intent to prevent lawful apprehension, malicious wounding, assault occasioning actual bodily harm, assault occasioning grievous bodily harm.

It is appropriate at this point to restate the first of the two basic questions with which this analysis is concerned. Do all or even most homicides result from a single-minded intention to kill? The data presented above concerning the relationship between assailant and victim, the social circumstances in which the offences tend to occur and other features of the assault, suggest that a significant proportion of homicides results from a less deliberate and determined intention.

It is necessary then, to address our second basic question. Would the replacement of firearms by the most dangerous probable substitute weapon result in a lower homicide rate?

The Substitute Weapon

In one sense, the range of alternative weapons is limited only by the imagination of the would be attacker. The burden of the present analysis is not, however, to weigh the dangerousness of firearms against a range of exotic but possible alternatives. Rather, the aim is to consider the lethality of the weapon which *probably would be used* in the type of situations where fatal assaults tend to occur and where a firearm is not readily available.

We are not entirely dependent on guesswork to identify this substitute weapon. Past experience again tells us quite a bit about the perceptions and impulses of those contemplating attack. Admittedly, the situation is not as clearly defined as Zimring observed to be the case in Chicago where weapons other than guns and knives were responsible for a less significant proportion of homicides. Nevertheless, as table III (next page) clearly shows, knives were second only to

guns as the weapon most frequently used in homicides committed in New South Wales*

Table III - Weapons used in Homicides N.S.W. 1972

	Number	Percentage
Firearms	28	34.1
Knives	25	30.5
Blunt instruments	8	9.8
Punching/kicking	14	17.1
Other	6	7.3
Not known	1	1.2
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	82	100.0

It would appear a reasonable assumption that the absence of firearms would result in a great many more knife attacks and a substantially greater number of attacks involving punching and kicking.

If the picture is widened to include serious as well as fatal knife and gun attacks, the police nominated motive for both types of assault is not radically different. Altercations accounted for six out of ten gun attacks and slightly more than seven out of ten knife attacks.

* An obvious limitation is that these figures deal with cases which are reported and may not reflect forms of homicide which go undetected or are not suspected as intentionally caused.

**Table IV - Police Nominated Motive of Assault by Weapon:
N.S.W. 1972**

	Shot No 100	Stabbed No 195
	Percentage	Percentage
General domestic	22.0	16.4
Money	2.0	3.1
Liquor	2.0	7.7
Sex	1.0	1.5
Triangle	12.0	9.2
Racial	2.0	-
Other Altercations	19.0	36.9
ROBBERY	6.0	5.6
'HORSEPLAY'	14.0	0.5
BUSINESS RIVALRY	-	2.1
GANG RIVALRY	3.0	0.6
OTHER	7.0	5.6
NOT KNOWN	10.0	10.8
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	100.0	100.0

Since there are no immediate prospects for reducing the number of conflict situations which give rise to fatal assaults, it would seem an attractive goal of social policy to try and restrict the choice of attack weapon to instruments which are of a less lethal character.

A Question of Lethalness

In the light of the information already presented concerning the circumstances in which knife and gun attacks take place, the key question is: does the choice of weapon make a difference? As always, a number of additional factors need to be considered but a brief answer to the above question is that gun attacks in New South Wales are 2.7 times more likely to result in a death than the reported knife attacks.

In all probability this figure understates considerably the comparative dangerousness of gun attacks. Overseas research suggests that people generally perceive gun attacks as being more serious than knife attacks and are thus more likely to report them. For the same reason police are more likely to file reports on gun attacks. Thus Zimring concluded in respect of Chicago police statistics that the ratio of 2.3 knife attacks per gun attack underestimated the true size of the ratio.* An identical knife/gun attack ratio was found to exist in New South Wales and it is equally likely that this figure overlooks a substantial number of unreported knife attacks. If this conjecture is correct it means that guns are even more lethal as attack weapons than the fatality ratio cited above suggests.

* Zimring: op. cit.,

The Attack

Despite the similarity in the circumstances of gun and knife attacks, the reader could be forgiven for attaching more significance to what the assailant actually does than to his inferred thoughts and feelings. Despite the material already presented, there remains the nagging suspicion that a person seriously committed to killing or maiming someone will select a firearm to accomplish this purpose. On the other hand an individual who wishes merely to impose a comparatively minor injury on his victim, may be more inclined to use a knife. In other words, the apparent lethality of gun attacks may tell us more about the intentions of one group of attackers than the dangerousness per se of the weapon they use.

One way of testing this possibility is to look at the location of the wound and regard this as a generally reliable indicator of the intended target. It is highly unlikely that a great number of individuals intending superficial wounds to a non-vital area of the victim's body would by mistake stab him in the back, chest, neck or abdomen.

In compiling table V (next page) priority was given to the most serious area of the body where a wound occurred in a knife or gun attack. The specific wound locations are grouped under two general headings, *serious* and comparatively *non-serious*.

**Table V – Non-Fatal and Fatal Gun and Knife Attacks
by Location of Most Serious Wound :
N.S.W. 1972**

	Knife No 195 <i>Percentage</i>	Gun No 100 <i>Percentage</i>
SERIOUS		
Chest	26.7	18.0
Abdomen	21.5	18.0
Head	6.2	21.0
Back	11.8	2.0
Neck	4.1	4.0
Shoulders	1.5	2.0
NON-SERIOUS		
Legs	6.7	12.0
Arms	17.4	6.0
Missed	0.5	9.0
NOT-KNOWN	3.6	8.0
TOTAL	100.0	100.0

Implications

The results of this analysis make it rather difficult to argue that guns are used by people with a more destructive intent. A slightly greater proportion (71.8 per cent) of reported knife woundings occurred in areas associated with serious attack - chest, abdomen, head and face, back and neck - compared with 65 per cent in the case of gun attacks. Presumably because of the victims' attempts to parry their assailants' blows, more knife attacks than gun attacks resulted in wounds to the arms, hands and wrists. However, this was offset by a greater number of gun wounds to the legs and thighs. Moreover in 9 per cent of gun attacks no wound was inflicted, compared with just one such case (0.5 per cent) among the knife attacks.

It is of course possible to advance the further argument that many of the 'failed' gun attacks and non-serious woundings may have resulted from miscalculation rather than a less serious intent. But it must be remembered that the wound locations recorded in table V show only the location of the most serious wound area in each assault. This means that attacks coded in less serious areas are attacks where the assailant did not try again or had no greater success.

There is at least one way in which we can refine our analysis by taking account of the inaccuracy of the person firing the gun. We can regard multiple woundings to non-serious areas as an indication of serious intent and add the percentage of such attacks to those inflicted on serious locations (see table VI). When we do this we find the situation remains relatively unaltered: 69 per cent of gun attacks can then be considered 'serious'. If multiple knife attacks are treated in the same way, the proportion of serious knife attacks increases to 76.4 per cent.

Table VI – Knife and Gun Attacks Resulting in Multiple Wounds: N.S.W. 1972

SERIOUS AREA			
Number of multiple wound attacks	68		17
Fraction of -			
non-fatal attacks	54/116		8/40
fatal attacks	14/24		9/25
NON-SERIOUS AREA			
Number of multiple wound attacks	9		4
Fraction of -			
non-fatal attacks	9/47		4/27
fatal attacks	-		-

Conclusion

While statistics have been used to try and evaluate the consequences of knife and gun attacks, no pretence is made to having finely quantified the complex human factors involved. Indeed, it has really been sufficient for the purposes of the present exercise to demonstrate the existence of a continuum between homicide and serious assaults. Not all gun attacks have the appearance of being clearly calculated attempts to kill someone. This is especially borne out by the tendency not to use the multiple shot capacity of the weapon and by the location of gun shot wounds. In the present study, there has simply been no evidence that 'attacks in earnest' are much more common with guns than with knives.

In the circumstances, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the 2.7 time greater fatality rate in gun attacks reflects the deadliness of the weapon and not just the destructive intent of the user. Furthermore, since a substantial proportion of homicides in New South Wales occur in situations of emotional conflict, the unavailability (or relative inaccessibility) of guns could be expected to diminish the number of homicides.

It has been useful in the present exercise to emphasise the pre-existing relations between attackers and their victims and the ambiguous motivation of many fatal and serious attacks. Needless to say, some homicides do result from a single-minded intention on the part of the assailant. It is beyond the capacity of the present data to identify which cases fall into this category. Suffice to say that the existence of such cases clouds the issue of precisely what reduction in the number of homicides could be expected to occur in the event that guns were unavailable. The indications from the present analysis are, however, that the saving of human life could be considerable.

Appendix A – Types of guns involved in Homicides

	Number
Rifle	10
Automatic rifle	2
Shot gun	10
Automatic shot gun	1
Pistol ⁽¹⁾	1
Not known	3

(1) Belonging to Police officer but used by assailant.