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Intimate partner homicides in NSW: 2005 to 2014

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Aim: *To analyse trends and characteristics in intimate partner homicides in NSW over the period January 2005 to December 2014.*

Method: *This study considers all murder and manslaughter events recorded by the NSW Police Force involving intimate partners, that is, a spouse/partner, an ex-spouse/ex-partner or a boy/girlfriend (including ex-boy/girlfriend). The data were extracted from police narratives and also the recorded crime database managed by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.*

Results: *Over the 10 year period to 2014 there were 169 victims of intimate partner homicide in NSW, (129 females and 40 males). The number of intimate partner homicides fluctuates from year to year (ranging from a low of 10 homicides in 2010 to a high of 22 homicides in 2013); however the trend over the past 10 years is stable. Almost 80 per cent of intimate partner homicide victims were killed by a current partner and 20 per cent by an ex-partner. Stabbing was the most common act causing death, with knives used in over one-third of intimate partner homicides. Approximately half of intimate partner victims had been identified by police as a victim in a previous violent incident and almost two-thirds of these violent offences involved the same person of interest as the homicide. In addition, almost one-quarter of intimate partner victims had taken an Apprehended Violence Order (AVO) out against the homicide offender.*

Conclusions: *Overall, less than one-third of intimate partner homicide victims had any prior contact with the police as a victim of a prior violent offence or AVO where the eventual homicide offender was the person of interest.*

Keywords: *Intimate partner homicide, domestic violence, murder, homicide, family violence*

Introduction

Mother-of-four stabbed to death, husband refused bail, Sydney Morning Herald, March 31 2015

Woman dead after horrific domestic assault injuries in Quakers Hill, The Daily Telegraph, April 29 2015

Sydney woman allegedly killed by husband had domestic violence counselling, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), May 13 2015

Apprentice hairdresser killed with scissors, NSW police say; husband charged with murder, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), 18 January 2015

As can been seen by the headlines above, recently there has been considerable media attention surrounding domestic violence, and in particular murders involving intimate partners. Among some there is also a perception that these types of offences are escalating. This brief provides information on the number and rate of intimate partner homicides in NSW over the last 10 years to December 2014. Characteristics of intimate partner homicide events are also described, including the number of victims and offenders per event, temporal and spatial aspects, the involvement of weapons and alcohol use. Victim and offender characteristics are also presented (such as age, sex, Indigenous status, remoteness and socio-economic index of disadvantage of area of residence), as

well as the relationship between the offender and the victim. The extent to which victims and offenders had contact with police for domestic violence-related incidents prior to the homicide, including Apprehended Violence Orders (AVOs), is also examined.

Method

Definition

For the purposes of this report, homicide is defined as incidents of murder or manslaughter as recorded by NSW Police. We have excluded attempted murder, conspiracy or accessory to murder and driving related fatalities. This definition reflects the National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP) definitions (Dearden & Jones 2008).

In NSW, the term domestic relationship is defined in the Crimes (Domestic and Personal Violence) Act 2007.[1] This definition however is broader than the focus here as, in addition to violence by intimate partners, it includes violence by any other family member, carer or housemate. The aim of this paper is to narrow the focus and examine just those homicide events involving intimate partners, both current and former.

Intimate partner case selection

Intimate partner homicides were manually identified from the complete record of all murder and manslaughter events recorded by the NSW Police Force between 1 January 2005 and 31 December 2014.[2] These data was extracted from the recorded crime database managed by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.

The NSW Police Force record information on the relationship between victims and offenders and whether an incident is domestic violence related which is of assistance in identifying intimate partner offences. However, examination of the homicides recorded by the NSW Police Force identified that some cases that should have been classified as domestic violence-related were not. Furthermore, information on the relationship between the offender and victim was not always complete.[3] As a result of this, the narratives (where police provide more specific free-text details) of all homicides involving murder or manslaughter across the time period were examined and intimate partner homicides identified by inspection. The definition used to classify intimate partner homicides was any murder or manslaughter event involving a spouse/partner, ex-spouse/ex-partner and boy/girlfriend (including ex-boy/girlfriend).

Each incident may involve more than one victim and/or offender. For incidents involving multiple victims/offenders the closest relationship between any pairing is used to categorise the incident. For example, if a person was murdered by their ex-wife and stepson, for the purpose of this paper the homicide would be categorised as an intimate partner homicide.

Recorded crime data

The following characteristics were available in the recorded crime data collection:

- sex, age and Indigenous status of the offender and the victim;
- date of the incident (i.e. the date the act causing death occurred);
- nature of the relationship (i.e. offender was the …. of the victim);
- location of the incident (both the geographical location and the type of premises);
- type of weapon used (if any);
- whether the police flagged the incident as alcohol related;
- whether the victim was protected by an Apprehended Violence Order (AVO); and
- whether there was any history of domestic violence between the victim and the offender.

Coding of intimate partner homicide narratives

For each intimate partner homicide, specific characteristics of the incident were coded from the police narrative. Due to their free-text nature, the level of detail relating to these characteristics varied considerably between the narratives. To get a more comprehensive account of incidents, where available, information from the police record was supplemented by information from media articles.

Key characteristics coded included:

- nature of the relationship;
- evidence of a history of domestic violence;
- the nature of the homicide (e.g. whether the incident was accidental or premeditated);
- whether the offender committed, or attempted to commit, suicide following the homicide;
- whether the victim and/or the offender were under the influence of alcohol;
- whether there were children present when the homicide occurred.

A few characteristics coded from the narratives (e.g. relationship, alcohol involvement and prior history of domestic violence) were also available in the recorded crime data collection. Data on these characteristics were compared, discrepancies were investigated, and data coded from narratives were verified.

Results

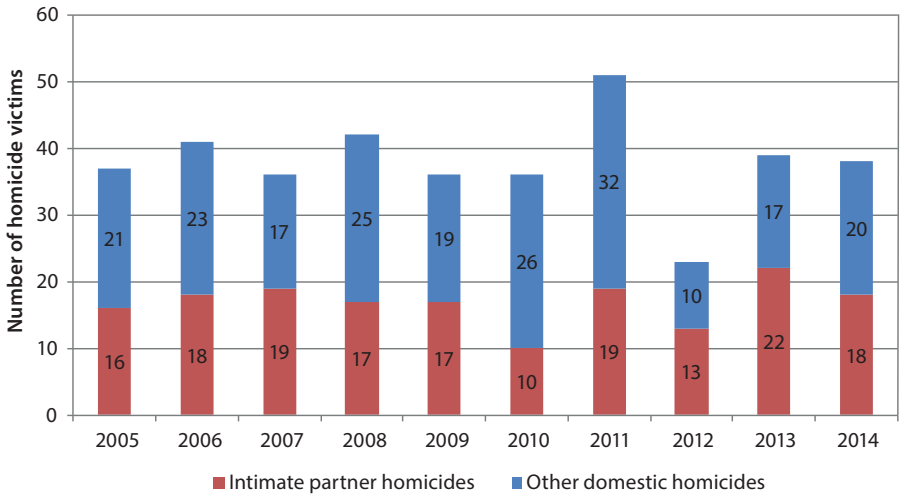
Trends

Over the 10 year period from 2005 to 2014 there were on average 93 victims of murder or manslaughter each year in NSW. Approximately, 40 per cent of these incidents were

classified by the police as domestic under their broad classification. This is consistent with national figures from the National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP) suggesting that 41 per cent of homicide victims in Australia were killed by a family member (Cussen & Bryant 2015a).

Figure 1 shows that approximately 50 per cent (44.6%) of homicide incidents classified by police as 'domestic' involved intimate partners.[4] Although there have been some fluctuations from year to year, the number of victims of intimate partner homicide has remained relatively stable since 2005, ranging from a low of 10 in 2010 to a high of 22 in 2013 (an average of 17 victims each year in NSW).

Figure 1. Domestic homicide and intimate partner homicide victims, 2005 to 2014

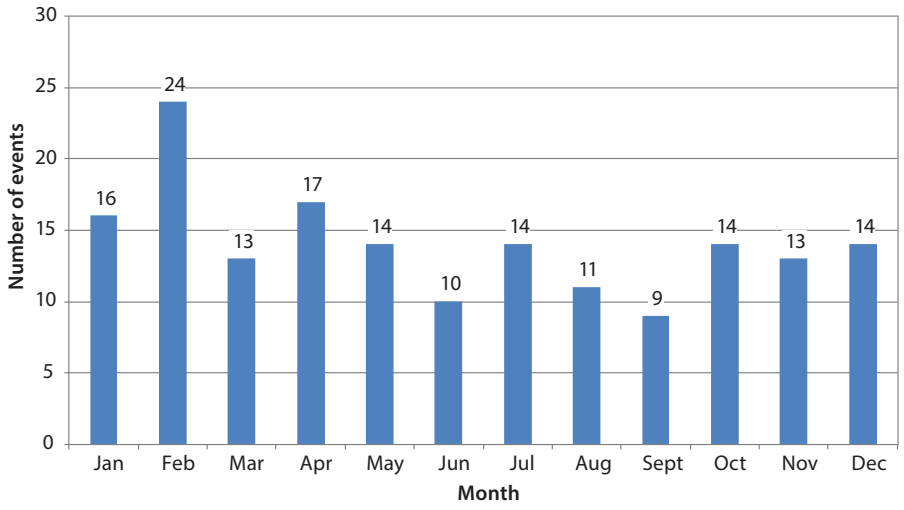


Event characteristics

Number of victims and offenders per homicide

The 169 victims of intimate partner homicide between 2005 and 2014 were killed in 169 events involving 184 offenders (where at least one of the offenders had an intimate relationship with the victim). Of these 169 events, 160 (94.7%) resulted in the death of a single victim (an intimate partner) and the remaining nine (5.3%) events resulted in the death of multiple victims, mainly children (7 child victims). Of the remaining six events involving multiple victims, five of the six events involved the death of either the victims' parent or sibling, while one event involved the death of two grandchildren. The majority of events (159 events, or 86.4%) involved a single offender, while 10 (13.6%) events involved multiple offenders. In events where multiple offenders were involved, the additional offenders were mainly a member of the offender's family or a new intimate partner of the offender.

Figure 2. Intimate partner homicide events by month of year, 2005 to 2014



When the homicide occurred

Events were reasonably well spread across time of day and days of the week. Table 1 shows that the greatest proportion of intimate partner homicide events occurred between 6pm and midnight (34.3%), and the smallest proportion between midnight and 6am (20.1%). Monday and Tuesday were the most common day on which intimate partner homicides occurred.

The highest numbers of intimate partner homicide events occurred in February and the lowest in September (Figure 2).

Table 1. Intimate partner homicide events by time of day and day of week

	Events (n=169)	
Time of day	**N**	**%**
Midnight to before 6am	34	20.1
6am to before noon	40	23.7
Noon to before 6pm	37	21.9
6pm to before midnight	58	34.3
Day of week		
Sunday	25	14.8
Monday	28	16.6
Tuesday	28	16.6
Wednesday	25	14.8
Thursday	17	10.1
Friday	20	11.8
Saturday	26	15.4

Where the homicide occurred

The majority (149 events, or 88.2%) of intimate partner homicide events occurred at residential premises. Most often, the residential dwelling was home to both the victim and the offender. The ratio of homicide events occurring at residential premises varied slightly over the 10 year period. For instance, in 2006, 72 per cent of intimate partner homicide events occurred at residential premises, while in 2014, 94 per cent of events occurred at residential premises.

Weapon use

As shown in Table 2, almost 40 per cent (39.1%) of the 169 intimate partner homicide events involved the use of a knife or other sharp implement, such as a pair of scissors or a broken bottle, and 19 (11.2%) involved a firearm. In at least 65 events (38.5%), no weapon, implement or object was used.

Table 2. Type of weapon used, 2005 to 2014

	Events (n=169)	
Weapon type	**N**	**%**
Sharp implement	67	39.6
Firearm	19	11.2
Other weapon*	18	10.7
No weapon	65	38.5

* Other weapons include bricks, rocks, iron bars and pipes, hammers, rope and other prohibited weapons.

The nature of the homicide

As Table 3 shows, stabbing was the most common act causing death (42% of victims). In the majority of these cases (92%) the weapon was a knife, primarily a kitchen knife. The next most common cause of death was being bashed or beaten (38 or 22.5% of victims). This includes the victim receiving a blow to the head by an object, such as a pipe, golf club or iron.

Table 3. Violent act causing death, 2005 to 2014

	Victims (n=169)	
Violent act causing death	**N**	**%**
Stabbed	71	42.0
Bashed, beaten	38	22.5
Gunshot	19	11.2
Strangled, suffocated	16	9.5
Poisoned, drug overdose	5	3.0
Burnt	5	3.0
Gassed, electrocuted	3	1.8
Other*	2	1.2
Unknown	10	5.9

* Other includes the victim being thrown over a balcony or being hit by a car.

In approximately 40 per cent (41.4%) of intimate partner homicide events the violent act causing death was impulsive and occurred in the heat of the moment of an argument between the victim and the offender. By contrast, a third (33.7%) of homicide events involved a level of premeditation or planning on the behalf of the offender. In a smaller proportion of events the act causing death was in self-defence (4.7%) or appeared accidental (3.0%). In the remaining 17.2 per cent of events the motivation for the homicide was unclear.

Alcohol involvement

In approximately one-third of intimate partner homicide events either the offender or the victim had consumed alcohol in the hours leading up to the homicide event (33.1%, n=56). Roughly half of these homicides involved the offender and the victim consuming alcohol together before the event (26 of the 56 events). In a further 19 events (11.2%) only the offender had consumed alcohol in the hours leading up to the homicide event.

Children present

In one in five (18.9%) intimate partner homicide events, a child or multiple children were recorded by police as being present at the same premises during the murder. In 5 events, a child or multiple children were also a murder victim(s).

Victim characteristics

This section examines the 169 victims who were identified as having an intimate partner relationship with the offender.

Sex and age

Of the 169 victims of intimate partner homicide, 129 (76.3%) were female and 40 (23.7%) were male. As Figure 3 shows, the ratio of male to female victims has varied slightly over the years. In 2005, 71 per cent of intimate partner homicide victims were female, while in 2014, 83 per cent were female.

The mean age of male intimate partner homicide victims was 45.1 years and the median age was 44.0 years. The mean age of female victims was slightly younger at 41.4 years with a median age 40.5 years. The oldest victim in the sample was 91 years and the youngest was 18 years.

However, despite similarities in these summary statistics, the age distribution of male and female victims varied somewhat. Figure 4 presents the distribution of intimate partner homicide victims by five-year age group and sex. While male victims were evenly spread across the different age groups, female victims were more positively skewed towards the younger age groups. In all five-year age groups there were more female than male victims of intimate partner homicide.

Indigenous status

While Indigenous people comprise around 2.5 per cent of the total NSW population (ABS 2011 Census), approximately 12 per cent of intimate partner homicide victims (21 of 169)

Figure 3. Victims of intimate partner homicide by sex, 2005 to 2014

Figure 4. Victims of intimate partner homicide by sex and age group, 2005 to 2014

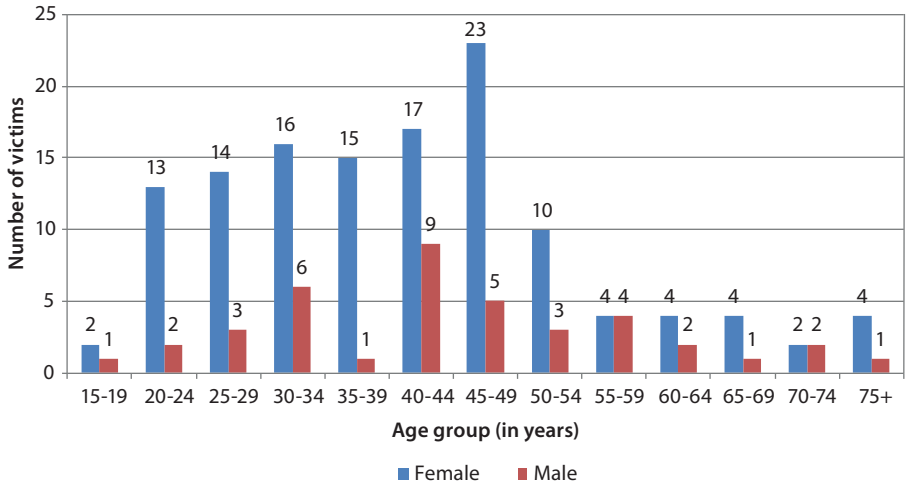


Table 4. Remoteness and index of socio-economic disadvantage of victim area of residence, 2005 to 2014

		Victims (n=169)		Population
		N	%	%
Remoteness[5]	Major Cities of Australia	115	68.0	73.5
	Inner Regional Australia	33	19.5	19.6
	Outer Regional Australia	18	10.7	6.2
	Remote Australia	1	0.6	0.4
	Very Remote Australia	2	1.2	0.1
Index of relative socio-economic disadvantage quintiles[6]	1 – Most disadvantaged	37	21.9	20.0
	2	42	24.9	20.0
	3	40	23.7	20.0
	4	32	18.9	20.0
	5 – Least disadvantaged	18	10.7	20.0

were recorded as being Indigenous. The disproportionate number of Indigenous homicide victims has previously been reported (Cussen & Bryant 2015b). At the national level in 2011-12, the rate of Indigenous homicide victimisation was approximately five times higher than that of non-Indigenous people.

Interestingly, the ratio of Indigenous and non-Indigenous victims varied to some extent on the gender of the victim. For example, while 8.5 per cent of female intimate partner homicide victims were Indigenous (11 of 129 female victims), proportionally a much large percentage of male victims were Indigenous (25% or 10 of 40 male victims).

Remoteness and socio-economic disadvantage of area of residence

Table 4 shows the percentage of events according to the remoteness and index of socio-economic disadvantage of the area of residence of intimate partner homicide victim. Sixty-eight per cent of victims resided in a major city, 30 per cent in a regional area, and the remaining two per cent in a remote location. This compares to the respective NSW population distribution of 74 per cent, 26 per cent and less than 1 per cent (ABS 2011a).

One in five (21.9%) intimate partner homicide victims resided in the most socio-economically disadvantaged quintile of the population, according to the Index of Relative Disadvantage (20% of the population, ABS 2011b). By comparison, only 11 per cent of intimate partner homicide victims resided in the least socio-economically disadvantaged areas compared to 20 per cent of the population.

Relationship between victim and offender

As shown in Table 5, for 33.7 per cent of intimate partner homicide victims the offender was the current spouse of the victim (38.8% of female victims

Table 5. Relationship between offender and victim by gender, 2005 to 2014

	Female victims (n=129)		Male victims (n=40)		Total victims (n=169)	
Relationship of offender to victim	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**
Spouse	50	38.8	7	17.5	57	33.7
Girlfriend/boyfriend	20	15.5	12	30.0	32	18.9
De facto	30	23.3	16	40.0	46	27.2
Ex-spouse	11	8.5	2	5.0	13	7.7
Ex-girlfriend/ex-boyfriend	18	14.0	3	7.5	21	12.4

and 17.5% of male victims). The next most frequent relationship was de-facto partner (27.2%), followed by girlfriend/boyfriend (18.9%). Finally, approximately one in five (20.1%) victims of intimate partner homicide was killed by an ex-partner, either an ex-spouse or ex-boyfriend/girlfriend (22.5% of female victims and 12.5% of male victims).

Previous police contact

In order to determine the nature of the victims' prior police contacts a search of the recorded crime database matching on either the victim's police-generated Central Names Index (CNI) number or a combination of both the victim's name (first name/surname) and date of birth was used. An examination of these prior police contacts shows that of the 169 victims of intimate partner homicide, almost half (47.9%; 81 of 169 victims) had been identified by police as a victim in a previous violent[7] incident prior to the homicide event.[8] More than 60 per cent (50 of 81) of these incidents involved the same person of interest as the homicide event. Almost of all these 50 victims (43 of 50) had been the victim of at least one prior domestic violence-related assault incident, with the number of previous incidents of victimisation ranging from one to five incidents. Seven victims had also been identified by police as a victim in a breach Apprehended Violence Order (AVO) incident.

Apprehended Violence Orders

Prior to the homicide event, 55 victims of intimate partner homicide had been protected by an AVO (32.5%). Almost three-quarters of these AVOs (40 of 55) involved the same person of interest as the homicide event (23.7% of all intimate partner victims).

There are three different types of AVOs that can be made at different points in time: provisional, interim and final orders.[9] Of the 40 victims who had an AVO against the homicide offender Table 6 shows the type of order most recently issued by the court. This table shows that 22 victims had final AVOs, 14 had interim AVOs and four had provisional AVOs.

Interestingly, the length of time between the date when the most recent AVO was issued and the homicide event varied substantially on the type of AVO issued. For example, three of the four provisional orders issued to intimate partner homicide victims were made on the day or day after the homicide, while for interim orders the median numbers of days between the most recent AVO issued and the homicide event was 41 days (ranging from 1 day to over 3 years). By comparison, for victims whose most recent AVO was a final order the median number of days between the date the final AVO was issued and the homicide event was 289 days (ranging from 3 days to over 13 years).

Table 6. Type of most recent AVO issued to victims protected by an AVO against the homicide offender

	Victims (n=40)	
Type of order	**N**	**%**
Final	22	55.0
Interim	14	35.0
Provisional	4	10.0
Total	**40**	**100.0**

Offender characteristics

This section examines the 184 offenders involved in the 169 intimate partner homicide events between 2005 and 2014.

Sex and age

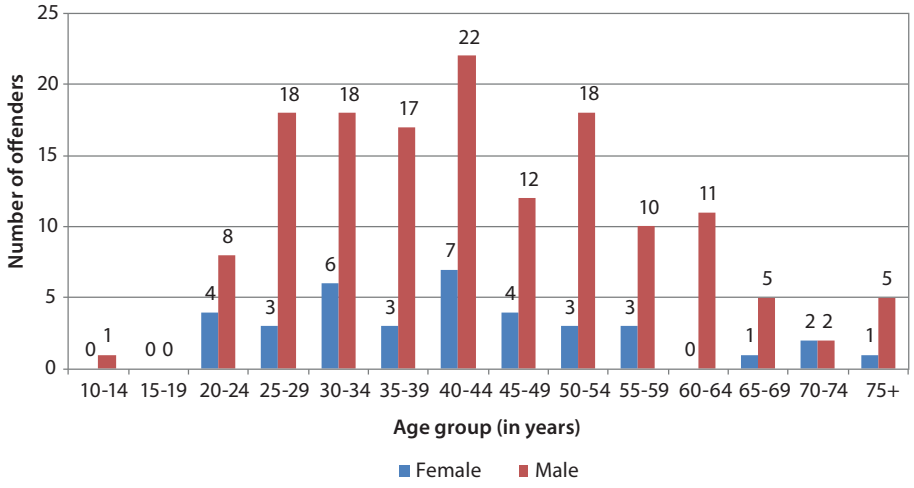
Over the 10 year period, 147 (80.8%) intimate partner homicide offenders were male. The ratio of male to female offenders by year is shown in Figure 5. The percentage of offenders who were male ranged from 62 per cent in 2009 to 91 per cent in 2007.

The overwhelming majority of intimate partner homicides involved a relationship between a male and female (97.0%). Only five events involved both a male offender and victim; there were no female to female intimate partner homicides.

As Figure 6 shows, just over half (51.0%) of male offenders were aged between 25 and 44 years. The mean age of male offenders was 43.6 years. Almost two-thirds of female offenders were aged between 20 and 44 years (62.2%). The mean age of female offenders was 42.6 years. Over the 10 year period, the oldest offender was 91 years and the youngest was 14 years.

Figure 5. Offenders of intimate partner homicide by sex, 2005 to 2014

Figure 6. Offenders of intimate partner homicide by sex and age group, 2005 to 2014



Indigenous status

Approximately 13 per cent of offenders were recorded as being Indigenous (23 of 184). As with the number of intimate partner homicide victims who were Indigenous, this is disproportionate to the population of Indigenous people in NSW (approximately 2.5%).

Of these 23 Indigenous offenders, 16 also involved an Indigenous victim. At the national level in 2011-12, intimate partner homicides involving both an Indigenous victim and offender were almost double the proportion of non-Indigenous intimate partner homicides (38% compared to 20%, Cussen and Bryant, 2015b).

Remoteness and socio-economic disadvantage of area of residence

Given that the majority of victims and offenders resided together, the geographical distribution of offenders is similar to that of victims. Sixty-seven per cent of offenders resided in a major city, one-third in a regional area, and the remaining two per cent in a remote location. Almost 25 per cent of intimate partner homicide offenders resided in the most socio-economically disadvantaged quintile of the population, according to the Index of relative Disadvantage (compared to 20% of the population).

Murder-suicide

Research suggests that the closer the relationship between the homicide offender and victim, the greater the likelihood the offender will commit suicide (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2008). Of the 184 offenders, 25 (13.6%) committed suicide during or immediately following the homicide event, and 13 (7.1%) offenders attempted suicide.

Summary and conclusion

Over the 10 year period to 2014 there were 169 victims of intimate partner homicide in NSW, (129 females and 40 males). The number of intimate partner homicides fluctuated from year to year (ranging from a low of 10 homicides in 2010 to a high of 22 homicides in 2013); however the trend has remained stable. Almost 80 per cent of intimate partner homicide victims were killed by a current partner and 20 per cent by an ex-partner. Stabbing was the most common act causing death, with knives used in over one-third of intimate partner homicides. Indigenous persons comprise of approximately 12 per cent of intimate partner homicide victims (21 of 169) and 13 per cent of offenders (23 of 184).

Similar to the findings of a previous BOCSAR report on domestic homicides (Ringland & Rodwell 2009), an important result to re-emerge from this study was the low percentage of victims who had contact with the police as a victim of a prior violence incident where the eventual homicide offender was the person of interest. Only one-third of victims had contact with the police prior to the homicide with involvements of this nature. Furthermore, only one-quarter of victims had taken an AVO out against the homicide offender prior to the homicide event. This suggests that the majority of intimate partner homicide victims and offenders do not come to the attention of the police prior to the homicide.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1 For the purposes of this Act, a person has a "domestic relationship" with another person if the person:

a) is or has been married to the other person, or

b) has or has had a de facto relationship with the other person,

c) has or has had an intimate personal relationship with the other person, whether or not the intimate relationship involves or has involved a relationship of a sexual nature, or

d) is living or has lived in the same household as the other person (e.g. flatmates), or

e) is living or has lived as a long-term resident in the same residential facility as the other person and at the same time as the other person (e.g. a nursing home or boarding house), or

f) has or has had a relationship involving his or her dependence on the ongoing paid or unpaid care of the other person, or

g) is or has been a relative of the other person (For the purposes of this Act, a person is a "relative" of another person (the "other person"): (a) if the person is:

i) a father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, step-father, step-mother, father-in-law or mother-in-law, or

ii) a son, daughter, grandson, grand-daughter, step-son, step-daughter, son-in-law or daughter-in-law, or

iii) a brother, sister, half-brother, half-sister, step-brother, step-sister, bother-in-law or sister-in-law, or

iv) an uncle, aunt, uncle-in-law or aunt-in-law, or

v) a nephew or niece, or

vi) a cousin), or

h) in the case of an Aboriginal person or a Torres Strait Islander, is or has been part of the extended family or kin of the other person according to the Indigenous kinship system of the person's culture.

2 Two events that began as missing persons cases in late 2004 but only become murder events in 2005 are included.

3 These inconsistencies are likely to be a result of the offender being unknown at the initial input of the information into the NSW Police Force's Computerised Operational Policing System (COPS). There were also inconsistencies with the recording of the status of the relationship, i.e. current partners versus ex-partners.

4 The next most common offender for homicides flagged by police as domestic was a parent (19.3%), followed by children (7.7%) or other family members (7.7%) or sibling (3.2%). For five per cent of victims the offender was a carer (5.5%) or other household member, such as a housemate or boarder (4.2%).

5 Remoteness is assigned based on the Remoteness Structure of the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS). http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/A277D01B6AF25F64CA257B03000D7EED/$File/1270055005_july%202011.pdf

6 The Index of Socioeconomic Disadvantage quintile was assigned according to the Socio-Economic

Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) 2006 (ABS 2008b), and was coded at Statistical Area Level 1 (SA 1) level. Twenty per cent of the population is represented in each quintile.

http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/22CEDA8038AF7A0DCA257B3B00116E34/$File/2033.0.55.001%20seifa%202011%20technical%20paper.pdf

7 Violent offences include assault, sexual offences, harassment or threatening behaviour.

8 A further 24 victims of intimate partner homicide had been identified by police as a victim in a previous property incident prior to the homicide event. These incidents include offences such as break and enter; car theft; fraud and personal theft.

9 A Provisional AVO is an order made by the police or court in response to an urgent application. The police will apply for a Provisional AVO when they believe that someone needs immediate protection. These orders are sometimes referred to as 'telephone interim orders (TIOs)' as they can be made by phone, fax or online. A Provisional AVO lasts for 28 days.

An Interim AVO is an order made by the court either:

a) extending a Provisional AVO or

b) where the court agrees that it is necessary or appropriate for someone to have temporary protection. An Interim AVO stays in place until the court makes a Final AVO, the police withdraw the Interim AVO, or the court dismisses the case.

A Final AVO may be made either because:

a) you have been served with the AVO documents but have not turned up to court

b) you have consented to the AVO,

c) a hearing has taken place and, based on the evidence, the court believes that an order should be made. A Final AVO will be made for a specified period of time, for example, six months, 12 months or two years. Most Final AVOs are made for 12 months.

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