

Filicide in Australia: A national study

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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

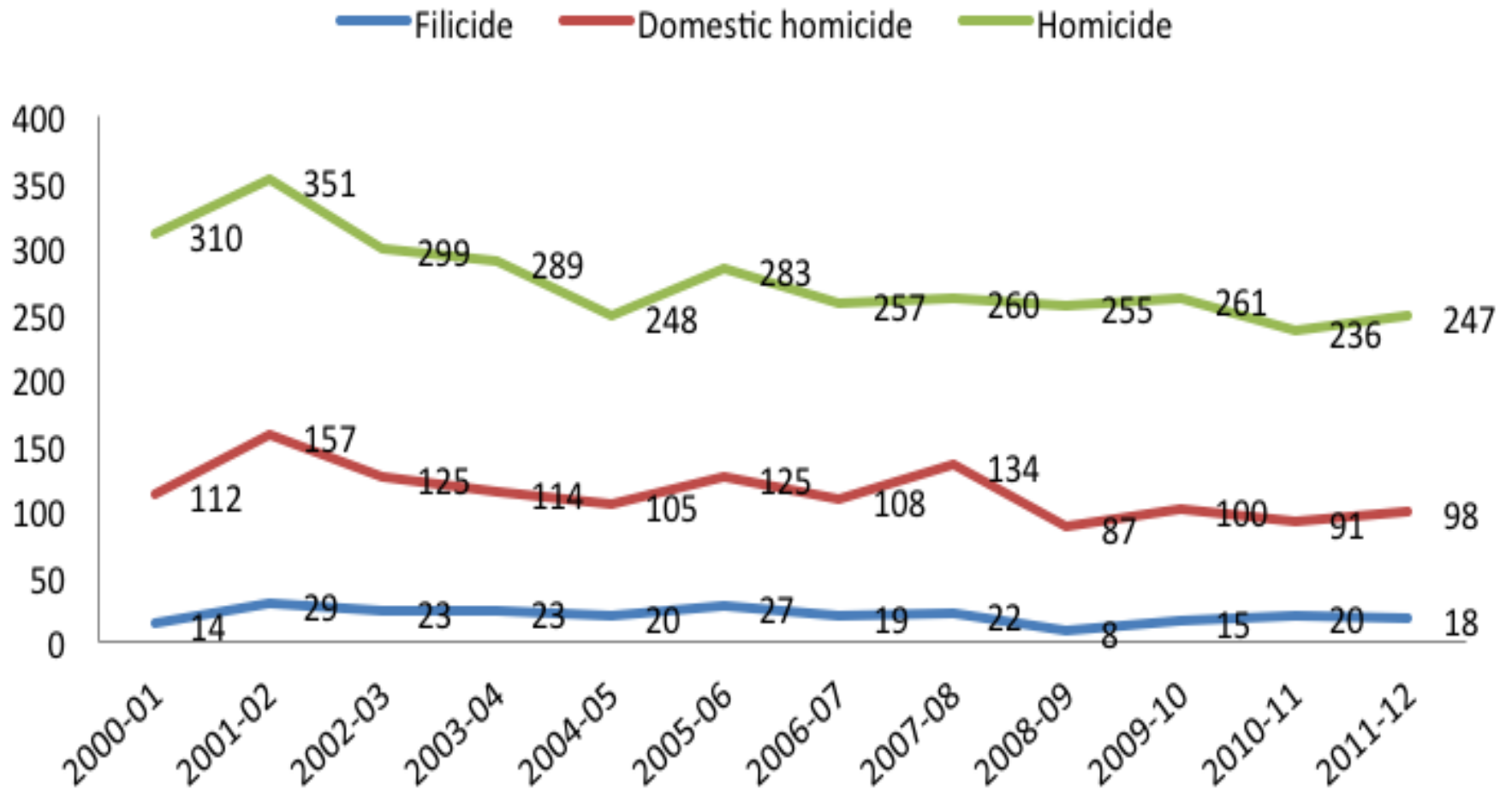
Filicide is: the non-accidental killing of a child or children by a parent or equivalent guardian (defacto parent/step-parent/grandparent/aunt uncle). It includes a number of sub-categories, such as infanticide and familicide (killing of a spouse and children)

- 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

	Victims		Incidents	
	n		n	%
Argument of a domestic nature	71		60	65
Revenge/jealousy	12		8	9
Desertion/termination	11		8	9
Offender apparently delusional	6		6	6
Alcohol related argument/other argument	9		6	6
Money	3		2	2
Sexual gratification	2		2	2
Prevent victim testifying against offender	1		1	1
Total	115		93	

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 (eg 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