

A Review of Domestic Violence Related Homicides in SA

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Homicide Research

- The Australian National Homicide Monitoring Program of AIC draws together statistical information about homicide events.
- Statistical data leaves open many of the qualitative aspects of homicide.
- Less informative about the sequence of events and the qualities of relationship between victim and offender.
- Less informative again around the prior involvement and actions of agencies and services and the pathways and timelines of victim contact .

Domestic Violence Related Homicide

- Domestic violence related homicide is defined in this research as a homicide involving an intimate partner or ex-partner and/or the children of at least one of the parties.
- Domestic violence related homicide is the primary context of women victims of homicide and a common context for filicide (Easteal 1993; Mouzos & Rushforth 2003, Johnson 2005; Strang 1992, 1996; Wallace 1986).
- 58 percent of intimate partner homicides in Australia in 2004-05 featured an existing record of domestic violence (Mouzos & Houliaras 2006)
- There are indications women and children face the greatest risks of domestic violence related homicide around parental separation (Easteal 1995; Mouzos & Rushforth 2003).
- ABS data (1996, 2006) indicates that ex-partners are the largest relationship category of male perpetrators of violence against women.
- The ABS Personal Safety Survey (2006) also reported that women victims of violence were now more likely to report assaults to police (36%), than they were in the Women's Safety Survey (1996), when only 19% of victims had reported assaults to police.
- This trend indicates that an increasing number of individuals involved in domestic violence related homicides would have had prior interactions with police.
- In SA, as in other Australian jurisdictions, police attending a domestic violence incident where children are present also make a report to child protection services. This protocol means that domestic violence cases will increasingly feature in child protection records.
- This study seeks to analyze these and other records which relate to domestic violence related homicides of women and/or children to explore their help-seeking activities and pathways, system responses, and the ways in which they are represented in agency records and decision-making and in media reports.

Domestic Violence Fatality Reviews

- In the United States domestic violence fatality reviews have been used since 1991 to investigate the antecedents and relationships surrounding homicide events and this information has in turn been used to reduce the number of domestic homicides by improving preventative responses by services and agencies (David 2007).
- To date Australia has no domestic violence fatality reviews.
- This proposed research seeks to follow the pathways of fatality reviews and examine on a case by case basis, what agencies or services had been involved, whether and how agencies and services responded, and what assessments and records shaped responses to victims.

SA Context

SA introduced its Family Safety Framework in 2007 drawing on the research by Caroline Johnson (2005) in WA, which examined post-separation father-child filicide cases.

- The SA Office for Women website <http://www.officeforwomen.sa.gov.au/index.php?section=970> (Viewed August 12 2008) notes that the Family Safety Framework involves:
- *A Family Safety Agreement which outlines a common understanding in relation to violence against women and children across the departments.*
- *Meetings that assess the level of risk to a family and implement positive action plans in relation to increasing the safety of families and holding perpetrators of violence accountable.*
- *An Information Sharing Protocol which clearly articulates the need for information sharing in relation to high risk cases of domestic violence and what information is required to be shared.*
- *Shared Risk Assessment Knowledge, which will be underpinned by a Red Flag risk indicator form for use in relation to the Family Safety Meetings.*
- *Evaluation - the Family Safety Framework Implementation Committee will work together with partners to identify clear and measurable outcomes for the Framework.*
- *An important component of the Framework is service providers working together to provide the best possible outcomes for women and children at high risk. This will include supporting women to remain in their homes where possible. The Framework also aims to remove some of the difficulties and frustration experienced by many women in navigating the service system.*
- *Further information: www.officeforwomen.sa.gov.au*

Sample Frame

- The proposed research plan is to examine SA cases of domestic violence related homicides from 2004-2010 so that the sample will enable analysis before and after the introduction of the Women's Safety Strategy which includes the Family Safety Framework and the SAPOL Better Policing Model.
- Homicide cases in South Australia involving deaths of mothers and/or children at the hand of partners or ex-partners will be included in the sample.
- A significant factor delaying access to case records is the need to wait until legal proceedings are finalized. This can mean a delay of some years.

Data Sources

- A key challenge of the research is identifying individual cases, finding where data relevant to each case is held and negotiating access to those records.
- These records would include files from the Coroner, child protection, Police, Victims Support Services Homicide Support Group, health services, Courts, Corrections, early childhood services and Women's Shelters.
- Where possible interviews with family members of the deceased about contact with agencies and services arising from domestic violence.
- There are numerous complexities about accessing data, including privacy constraints, agency and system differences in coding, storing and retrieving information.
- Hopefully agencies and services will enable the research as they recognize the potential value of the research in supporting better outcomes for domestic violence victims. There has been encouraging preliminary support from Office for Women, SAPOL and Victims of Crime for the project in initial discussions.

Analysis of Records

- Two processes of analysis. 1. Focus on demographics and identifying the agencies/systems with which the victim(s) had contact and 2. Focus on representation of the victim and perpetrator in documents and media reporting.

1st ANALYSIS

- Demographic and relationship characteristics of victims – SES, age, occupation, relationship status, cultural identity.
- Prior access to services and the pathways of response to the victim.
- Practices, protocols, behaviour and attitudes associated with services and criminal justice response systems.
- Any links between attitudes of service providers to victims and perpetrators, the decision making around responses and the outcomes in each case.
- The findings will inform understandings of help-seeking behaviour of victims, the responses they received, inter-agency links and the pathways and periods of time over which these occurred.

2nd Analysis

- Public attitudes and beliefs about domestic violence are recognized as significant to the way victims and perpetrators are viewed by service professionals and the public.
- Media coverage of the selected homicide cases will therefore also be researched and analysed
- As well as a critical discourse analysis of the documentation of the case across the various agency records.

Discourse Analysis

- The analysis of the representation of victims and perpetrators in media reports and professional case notes and responses to them will inform:
 - The ways different services construct DV victims and assess risk and respond
 - The ways different services construct perpetrators and assess risk and respond
 - How systems speak within and between themselves
 - How case notes/reports influence what actions are taken by whom and to whom
 - What 'types' of victims are constructed and what this means for the responses they receive.
 - What 'types' of perpetrators are constructed and what this means for the responses they receive.
 - The analysis will also seek to identify any differences between urban, rural or remote cases.

One Case

- One case which has been recently again in the media was the murder of Penny Christopher on January 31 2004, by John Trenorden, who later suicided in police custody on February 4 2004.
- Media reports at the time described Trenorden variously as a 'radio star' and a 'flamboyant radio journalist,' whilst his victim was described as his 'business partner' and 'former girlfriend' and a 'naked and battered body'.
- The public profile and suicide of the perpetrator dominated media coverage, with much attention given to Trenorden's capacity to 'spin' and 'bluff' authorities about his intentions to suicide.
- The Coronor's report echoes this focus with most of the report dedicated to the suicide of the perpetrator.
- The victim's context, history and experience receive relatively minimal mention, with little insight offered around what had happened to her.
- The victim becomes a kind of 'black box' whose death provides the necessary 'storyline' of a murder, but the ongoing drama belongs with the perpetrator in legal processes which retrospectively shape and categorize the events.
- This research seeks to excavate the systemic and discursive frameworks which shape the victim's experiences to examine opportunities for progressive reforms which reduce homicide risks.

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