

PATHWAYS TO INTIMATE PARTNER HOMICIDE:

# THE “FIXATED THREAT” OFFENDER TRAJECTORY

Intimate partner homicides (IPHs) accounted for 21 per cent of all homicides in Australia in 2018–19, and 62 per cent of all domestic homicides.<sup>1</sup> Since 1989–90 there have been an average 68 IPHs per year in Australia, and the majority of these were perpetrated by a male offender against a female intimate partner.<sup>2</sup> To address a gap in understanding of IPH in Australia, a research team led by Dr Hayley Boxall of the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC)<sup>3</sup> examined the life course trajectories of IPH offenders.

The research findings are contained within the ANROWS research report, [The “Pathways to intimate partner homicide” project: Key stages and events in male-perpetrated intimate partner homicide in Australia](#).

The research team analysed sentencing remarks, coronial findings and information sourced from the AIC’s National Homicide Monitoring Program collected for a sample of 199 incidents of male-perpetrated IPH<sup>4</sup> of a female partner which took place in Australia between 1 July 2007 and 30 June 2018, and identified three primary offender types and pathways to IPH:

1. Fixated threat (33% of the sample)
2. Persistent and disorderly (40% of the sample)
3. Deterioration/acute stressor (11% of the sample)

The identification of these three trajectories underscores the finding that there is not a single pathway to IPH, but a complex and diverse series of pathways that can lead to a lethal incident. Despite the multiplicity of pathways, however, it is possible to identify intervention points along these pathways and better support prevention of men’s lethal violence against women.

This resource focuses on the “fixated threat” trajectory, and examines characteristics of the offender type as well as opportunities for intervention along the specific pathway. Education, early intervention and bystander intervention programs targeting family and friends are recommended responses across all pathway types, and specific interventions for this pathway are outlined below.

## KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FIXATED THREAT PATHWAY

### FIXATED THREAT (FT) OFFENDER CHARACTERISTICS

FT offenders were jealous, controlling and abusive in relationships but relatively functional in other domains of life. For example, a number of FT offenders were employed in well-respected industries, or ran their own businesses. This offender type used IPH as a means to re-establish control, either over the victim or in other domains of his life (that he blamed the victim for loss of control over).

**49%**

of FT offenders had **experienced trauma** in their lifetime

**21%**

of FT offenders had been **abusive towards former partners**

### Mental, physical and cognitive health:

- **42%** of FT offenders had a **mental illness**
- **12%** had a **long-term health condition**
- **29%** had an **alcohol or other drug use disorder**
- **8%** had a **cognitive impairment**
- Rates of **comorbidity** were relatively **low** among FT offenders: **25%** had **two or more co-occurring** mental, physical and cognitive **health issues**

### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VICTIM AND OFFENDER

**81%**

were either **married or in a de facto relationship**, with a median relationship length of 9 years

**51%**

had at least **one child together**

**85%**

**were abusive towards the victim during the relationship**, with the violence primarily described as coercive controlling behaviours and non-physical forms of abuse (e.g. emotional and verbal abuse, stalking)

### THE LEAD-UP TO THE LETHAL INCIDENT

- The victim and offender had **separated in 61% of cases**, with the victim the instigator of the separation in all cases
- In the **context of the separation**, the offender’s **controlling behaviours increased** and changed significantly, and they repeatedly attempted to reconcile; they may have also started to try to **punish victims via spreading rumours** about them to their friends and colleagues
- There was evidence that FT offenders’ motivation to kill their partner increased during this period: **34% made threats** to kill the victim in the lead-up to the lethal incident, and **36% engaged in planning activities** (e.g. obtaining weapons)

## THE LETHAL INCIDENT

FT offenders entered the same space as the victim with an intent to control them, including through the use of lethal force. For example, many of the offenders used subterfuge or forced their access to the victim, and brought a weapon with them. Only 30% of offenders were intoxicated at time of the lethal incident. 49% of FT offenders also attempted to cover-up their crimes, including hiding the body and disposing of weapons.

**Most FT offenders appeared to be unwilling to be held accountable for their actions:**

**49%**  
pled not guilty

**63%**  
were viewed as not  
being remorseful

**22%**  
appealed their  
conviction

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION ON THE FIXATED THREAT PATHWAY

One of the major challenges in responding to intimate partner violence perpetrated by the FT offender is that their abuse involves primarily non-physical coercive controlling behaviours, and as such they are not often visible to law enforcement.



Disrupting this trajectory requires continual investment for frontline workers in how to detect and respond to coercive control



Intelligence-led policing is a promising and innovative avenue for disrupting the FT offender pathway, when delivered in partnership with representatives from the family law, mental health and domestic violence sectors

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bricknell, S., & Doherty, L. (2021). Homicide in Australia 2018–19. *Statistical Report*, no. 34. Australian Institute of Criminology. <https://doi.org/10.52922/sr78153>

<sup>2</sup> Bricknell, S., & Doherty, L. (2021). Homicide in Australia 2018–19. *Statistical Report*, no. 34. Australian Institute of Criminology. <https://doi.org/10.52922/sr78153>

<sup>3</sup> The full research team is Dr Hayley Boxall, Laura Doherty, Dr Siobhan Lawler, Dr Samantha Bricknell (all of the AIC), and Christie Franks (formerly of the AIC).

<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of the research, “intimate partner homicide” was defined as an incident where a male offender was charged, by a state or territory police agency, with killing their female current or former intimate partner at some stage in the investigation. Offenders whose charges were subsequently changed to manslaughter, or were found guilty of manslaughter were also included in the sample.

### SOURCE

Boxall, H., Doherty, L., Lawler, S., Franks, C., & Bricknell, S. (2022). *The “Pathways to intimate partner homicide” project: Key stages and events in male-perpetrated intimate partner homicide in Australia* (Research report, 04/2022). ANROWS.

### SUGGESTED CITATION

Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety. (2022). *Pathways to intimate partner homicide: The “fixated threat” offender trajectory* [Fact sheet]. ANROWS.