

PATHWAYS TO INTIMATE PARTNER HOMICIDE:

# THE “PERSISTENT AND DISORDERLY” 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 “persistent and disorderly” 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 PERSISTENT AND DISORDERLY PATHWAY

### PERSISTENT AND DISORDERLY (PD) OFFENDER CHARACTERISTICS

PD offenders were involved in relationships characterised by jealousy, persistent intimate partner violence and frequent contact with the criminal justice system. They were often Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples and had complex histories of trauma and abuse, as well as histories of violence towards intimate partners and others.

### 70%

of PD offenders had experienced trauma in their lifetime

### 40%

of PD offenders had been abusive towards former partners

#### Mental, physical and cognitive health:

- 36% of PD offenders had a mental illness
- 16% had a long-term health condition
- 74% had an alcohol or other drug use disorder
- 30% had a cognitive impairment
- Rates of comorbidity were high among PD offenders: 49% had two or more co-occurring mental, physical and cognitive health issues

### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VICTIM AND OFFENDER

### 66%

were married or in a de facto relationship, with a median relationship length of 2 years

### 22%

had at least one child together

### 79%

of PD offenders were abusive towards the victim during the relationship. The violence was primarily physical (slapping, hitting, punching, assaults with a weapon, non-fatal strangulation), but non-physical forms of abuse, including emotional and verbal abuse, were also common

### THE LEAD-UP TO THE LETHAL INCIDENT

- Separation was rare among PD offenders: only in 12% of cases had the offender and victim separated
- Despite the presence of chronic mental health-related issues, there was very little evidence that the offender’s mental and physical health deteriorated in the lead-up to the lethal incident
- While there was also little evidence that patterns of violence and abuse changed within relationships involving a PD offender, contact with the criminal justice system may have increased: 26% of PD offenders were the subject of court orders placing restrictions on their contact with the victim at the time of the lethal incident

## THE LETHAL INCIDENT

The decision to seriously harm the victim appeared to be instantaneous, rather than planned: only two offenders engaged in planning activities, and offenders rarely used subterfuge or force to gain access to the victim. Further, four in five offenders and victims were intoxicated at time of the lethal incident. Instead, risk of lethality appeared to be heightened during these incidents due to situation-specific vulnerabilities, such as the absence of capable bystanders and the availability of weapons.

Despite the potential spontaneity of the decision to kill their partner, PD offenders overall appeared to be unwilling to be held accountable for their actions:

**40%**  
pled not guilty

**45%**  
attempted to conceal  
their actions

**30%**  
were viewed as not  
being remorseful

**14%**  
appealed their  
conviction

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION ON THE PERSISTENT AND DISORDERLY PATHWAY

There is a relatively strong evidence base regarding intervention points along the PD offender trajectory. This type of offender, the most “visible” of the three, had high levels of contact with statutory services.



Prevention is key, and must be tailored to meet the different requirements of family, community and school settings



Early intervention and the provision of targeted, integrated and timely support is a crucial factor in preventing IPH among this cohort of offenders



The provision of perpetrator interventions integrated with alcohol and other drug and mental health services enables support to be provided for contextual and situational risk factors (e.g. comorbidity and alcohol use)

### 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 “persistent and disorderly” offender trajectory* [Fact sheet]. ANROWS.