

PATHWAYS TO INTIMATE PARTNER HOMICIDE:

# THE “DETERIORATION/ ACUTE STRESSOR” 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 “deterioration/acute stressor” 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 DETERIORATION/ACUTE STRESSOR PATHWAY

### DETERIORATION/ACUTE STRESSOR (DAS) OFFENDER CHARACTERISTICS

DAS offenders tended to be non-Indigenous and older. While they had significant emotional, mental and physical health problems, they were involved in long-term, “happy” and non-abusive relationships – until a deterioration in their health and wellbeing, often co-occurring with the onset or exacerbation of a significant life stressor, had a negative impact on their relationship with and attitude towards the victim.

### 41%

of all DAS offenders had experienced trauma in their lifetime

### 11%

had been abusive towards former partners

#### Mental, physical and cognitive health:

- 68% of DAS offenders had a mental illness
- 32% had a long-term health condition
- 53% had an alcohol or other drug use disorder
- 32% had a cognitive impairment
- Rates of comorbidity were very high among DAS offenders: 68% had two or more co-occurring mental, physical and cognitive health issues

### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VICTIM AND OFFENDER

### 89%

of DAS offenders were either married or in a de facto relationship, with a median relationship length of 23 years

### 47%

had at least one child together

There was evidence that only two DAS offenders had perpetrated abusive behaviours – described as relatively minor – towards the victim during the relationship.

### THE LEAD-UP TO THE LETHAL INCIDENT

Separation was rare among cases involving a DAS offender: only 10% of DAS offenders were separated at the time of the lethal incident

- 68% of DAS offenders experienced escalating symptoms associated with historical health conditions in the lead-up to the lethal incident
- In four cases, the offender started to become abusive and violent towards the victim – specifically, engaging in low levels of emotional abuse and minor forms of physical violence – in the lead-up to the lethal incident

## THE LETHAL INCIDENT

No DAS offenders engaged in planning activities, and the decision to seriously harm the victim appeared to be instantaneous. Offenders rarely used subterfuge or force to gain access to the victim.

DAS offenders overall appeared to be willing to be held accountable for their actions:

**26%**  
pled not guilty

**11%**  
were viewed as not  
being remorseful

**11%**  
appealed their  
conviction

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION ON THE DETERIORATION/ACUTE STRESSOR PATHWAY

Obvious early intervention points for disrupting the DAS offender pathway are difficult to find due to many DAS offenders not showing established risk factors for IPH.



However, as a result of the adverse mental health experiences of DAS offenders, mental health professionals could be well placed to conduct risk assessments and identify increasing risk of IPH in the context of deteriorating mental health

### 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 “deterioration/acute stressor” offender trajectory* [Fact sheet]. ANROWS.