

FILICIDES IN THE CONTEXT OF DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

Children and young people are victims and survivors of domestic and family violence in their own right. Yet, their experiences are often overlooked in the public discussion.

Advances in media reporting have significantly raised awareness of domestic and family violence. Yet, legal and ethical issues can limit reporting on children's experiences. These limits mean their stories are rarely told and the impact of domestic and family violence on children is poorly understood.

This research provides a rare opportunity to increase public understanding of the impact that domestic and family violence has on children.

THE UNIQUE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS REPORT

This report presents the first national figures for filicides that have occurred in Australia in the context of domestic and family violence. Despite a decline in other forms of domestic homicide, filicide persists with around 20 cases each year. The filicide rate in Australia is notably higher than that of countries like England and Sweden, highlighting the urgent need to explore the circumstances leading parents to kill their children.

This report found a striking 76 per cent of filicides occurred within a domestic and family violence context, meaning that there was an identifiable history of either or both child abuse or intimate partner violence. This is a significant finding calling for immediate whole-of-society level responses.

While this study provides new statistics about the number of children killed in the context of domestic and family violence, it ultimately represents just a glimpse of the true extent of violence on children's lives.

UNDERSTANDING THE TERMINOLOGY USED IN THE REPORT

Domestic and family violence context: means that before the filicide there was an identifiable history of either or both child abuse and intimate partner violence; collectively these are referred to as domestic and family violence.

Identifiable history: means there was evidence of prior violence in the data reviewed as part of this project. Data sources included briefs of evidence, police reports, inquest findings, autopsy and toxicology reports, sentencing remarks, service case notes, witness statements and case reviews. Not all violence was reported to services before the filicide.

Child abuse: any physical, emotional or sexual violence towards either or both the filicide victim and their siblings perpetrated by a parent.

Intimate partner violence: any intimate partner violence involving the child's parents.

Filicide: the killing of a child by the child's parent.

Parent: is used to refer to the filicide victim's father, mother, and any other person with parental responsibility for the child on a more than temporary basis (for example, an adoptive or foster parent, a step-parent, a parent's partner or a grandparent who is the child's primary carer).

Gendered: where data reveals distinct differences for men and women filicide offenders in factors like behaviour and history, we have described this as "gendered". The data shows gender does not significantly affect who becomes a victim of filicide. However, when it comes to committing filicide in a domestic and family violence context, offenders are predominately men. Other factors were also found to have strong gendered patterns, such as perpetration and victimisation of intimate partner violence, histories of violent criminal offending, the perpetration of child abuse, and other issues such as poor mental health and substance use. No transgender or non-binary parents were identified.

REPORTING THE DATA

THE GENDERED NATURE OF FILICIDE

The study found filicide offending following a history of domestic and family violence looks different for men and women. Looking at this gendered difference is necessary if we are to prevent filicides in the context of domestic and family violence. It highlights the complexity of filicide offending, gives context to the violence that often precedes filicides, and counters the myth that they are random acts of violence. Reporting these factors increases public awareness and helps to inform policy and systems reforms to keep children and young people safe.

DO

- Emphasise the strong connection between a history of domestic and family violence, especially intimate partner violence and filicide. Most of the time, the killing of a child by their parent is not a “one-off incident” but part of a history of behaviour.
- Explain the gendered nature of intimate partner violence by providing prevalence statistics.
- Keep gender-focused statistics together. For example, “Of the filicide offenders, 97 per cent identified as primary perpetrators of intimate partner violence were men, while 96 per cent identified as primary victims of intimate partner violence were women.”
- Highlight that intimate partner violence impacts children. Child sexual, physical and emotional abuse often coexist alongside a parent’s use of intimate partner violence. Even where these direct forms of abuse do not occur, children are experiencing the acute and chronic impacts of living in a home where a parent, usually a father or stepfather, is using violence towards a partner, usually the child’s mother.
- Seek out expert comment on the interconnected, yet separate, nature of children’s and women’s experiences of domestic and family violence.

DON'T

- Quote a single statistic without context.
- Imply women experiencing violence are at fault for not preventing violence against their children.
- Suggest abusive men are “driven” by separation to kill their children or that they “just snapped”. Instead, focus on the significant percentage of filicides in which there was a history of abuse demonstrating that the killing of these children was part of a pattern of behaviour.

THE IMPACT OF FAMILY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ON CHILDREN

This report demonstrates that violence against women and violence against children are not separate issues, rather they are inextricably linked. While a history of abuse may be immediately obvious when women are killed by intimate partners, this data shows similar preceding patterns exist when parents kill their children.

DO

- Centre children as victims of domestic and family violence in their own right.
- Include quotes from experts to give context. Look for people working and advocating alongside children and young people and their families across prevention, early intervention and response to domestic and family violence.
- Include the contact details of national and local helplines including those that cater to specific community needs.
- Consider reaching out to a trained media advocate with lived experience of domestic and family violence.
- Include the finding that the victims of filicide in the report are survived by at least 122 siblings. This is likely a significant underestimate. These children are victims and survivors in their own right.

DON'T

- Use stock images showing women or children being threatened or hurt. For example, photos of a man’s fist or a child or woman cowering.

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER VICTIMS AND OFFENDERS

The findings relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander filicide victims and offenders must be considered with respect to the context within which this violence occurred, namely colonisation and intergenerational trauma, the ongoing colonial system, systemic racism and the persistent lack of appropriate services, deficiencies in the practices of identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the limited resourcing of support services and programs.

DO

- Alongside findings about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander filicide offenders, include the finding that 1 in 5 (21%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims were killed by a non-Indigenous parent. This provides additional context to the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children often experience violence perpetrated by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous men.
- Highlight that domestic and family violence responses should be designed in a culturally safe way, led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts.
- Refer to specific advice by Our Watch on [Tips for reporting on violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women](#).

SOME DATA LIMITATIONS

DISABILITY: Less than 1 in 10 (6%) filicide victims were recorded as having a disability. This is likely an underestimate reflecting limitations in identifying disability in service data and the very young age of many of the victims. Children with disability are over-represented as victims of domestic and family violence and often face distinct barriers to receiving safety and healing responses.

CULTURAL AND RACIALLY MARGINALISED:

This project did not capture whether filicide victims or offenders came from culturally or racially marginalised communities, limiting the opportunity to highlight the unique systemic and structural barriers that culturally and racially marginalised people experience. A quarter of filicide offenders were born outside of Australia; these findings align with the general population rates. Only seven filicide victims were born overseas; these low rates likely reflect the very young ages of many of the filicide victims.

Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety Limited (ANROWS) is a not-for-profit independent national research organisation. ANROWS is an initiative of Australia's National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022. ANROWS was established by the Commonwealth and all state and territory governments of Australia to produce, disseminate and assist in applying evidence for policy and practice addressing violence against women and their children. ANROWS is the only such research organisation in Australia.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT:

ELLIOTT HOLOHAN, ANROWS MEDIA & STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS SPECIALIST
ELLIOTT.HOLOHAN@ANROWS.ORG.AU | 02 8374 4045

SOURCE

Australian Domestic and Family Violence Death Review Network, & Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. (2024). *Australian Domestic and Family Violence Death Review Network data report: Filicides in a domestic and family violence context 2010-2018* (1st ed.; Research report, 06/2024). ANROWS.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. (2024). *Tips for reporting findings from Australia's first national report on filicides in the context of domestic and family violence* [Media resource]. ANROWS.

LGBTQ+: No transgender or non-binary parents or children were identified in the data. The report did not capture if offenders or victims identified as sexuality diverse. Accurately identifying gender and sexuality diversity in existing data sources is a known research challenge. There is an urgent need to better capture this data as LGBTQ+ people, including children and young people, are over-represented as victims of domestic and family violence.

OTHER TIPS

- Seek clarification for any complexity in the data from ANROWS.
- [Use infographics provided](#) to assist understanding of the statistics.
- Draw on tips developed by Our Watch in collaboration with journalists on [how to report on violence against women](#).

NATIONAL HELPLINES TO INCLUDE IN REPORTING

- 1800RESPECT (1800 737 732)
- Lifeline (13 11 14)
- Kid's Helpline (1800 551 800)
- 13YARN (13 92 76)
- Rainbow Sexual, Domestic and Family Violence Helpline (1800 497 212)

READ THE REPORT HERE 