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Abstract | Research on young persons who commit homicide has largely focused on associative factors rather than event characteristics. This paper uses 25 years of data from the National Homicide Monitoring Program to describe the characteristics of homicide incidents perpetrated by offenders aged 10–17 years. In particular it examines if young homicide offenders are more likely to co-offend and if incident, victim and offender characteristics vary depending on whether the young person killed on their own or with others.

Co-offending among young homicide offenders in Australia

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Homicide committed by young people is a rare event. However, it is this relative rarity that can generate substantial attention when such an event occurs. International research has largely focused on factors that are associated with young people who commit homicide rather than characteristics of the homicide offence (see, for example, Cornell, Benedek & Benedek 1987; DeLisi, Piquero & Cardwell 2014; Heide & Solomon 2009, 2003; Lennings 2004; Roe-Sepowitz 2009, 2007). Available studies on offence characteristics suggest that young people are more likely to commit homicide with others, particularly if they are female or aged less than 16 years (Carcach 1997; Heide & Sellers 2014; Rodway et al. 2011; Woodworth, Agar & Coupland 2013). Young female offenders are more likely to victimise family members and young male offenders are more likely to kill strangers (Heide & Sellers 2014; Rodway et al. 2011; Woodworth, Agar & Coupland 2013). The probability of a homicide being perpetrated by multiple young offenders also increases with social distance—multiple young homicide offenders are more likely to kill strangers than known victims, irrespective of the offenders' gender (Heide & Sellers 2014; Woodworth, Agar & Coupland 2013).

This paper uses 25 years of data from the National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP) to describe the characteristics of homicide incidents perpetrated by offenders aged 10–17 years. It examines if young homicide offenders in Australia are more likely to co-offend and if incident, victim and offender characteristics vary depending on whether the young person killed on their own or with others.

Data source

The data presented in this report are derived from the NHMP. The NHMP collates data on homicide incidents, victims and offenders recorded by state and territory police. Police offence records are supplemented with data drawn from state coronial records accessed from the National Coronial Information System and media and court transcript sources where available.

Homicide refers to the unlawful killing of a person; a *homicide incident* is an event in which one or more persons are killed in the same place and at the same time. This includes:

- all cases where a person is charged with murder or manslaughter;
- all murder-suicides classified as murder by police; and
- all other deaths classed as homicides by police, whether or not an offender was apprehended.

For the current study, young offenders were defined as individuals aged between 10 and 17 years. This was based on the minimum age of criminal responsibility and the maximum age of a young person before being considered an adult in most Australian state and territory criminal legislation. Persons in Queensland who were aged 17 years at the time the offence was committed are dealt with under criminal legislation relating to adults.

Methodological considerations

The findings presented in this paper should be interpreted based on the following considerations. A homicide incident may result in the death of one or more victims and may be perpetrated by one or more offenders. Where homicide incidents involve multiple victims and/or offenders, the closest relationship between any pairing is used to categorise the homicide into one of three homicide incident types—domestic, acquaintance or stranger. For example, if a victim was murdered by their brother and a close friend, the incident is classified as a domestic homicide.

Victim characteristics are based on the first recorded victim in the homicide incident.

Rates were calculated using Australian Bureau of Statistics population data. Rates for young homicide offenders are based on the population aged 10–17 years and rates for adult offenders on the population aged 18 years and over. The analysis excluded 138 offenders whose age was recorded as unknown at the time of data collection.

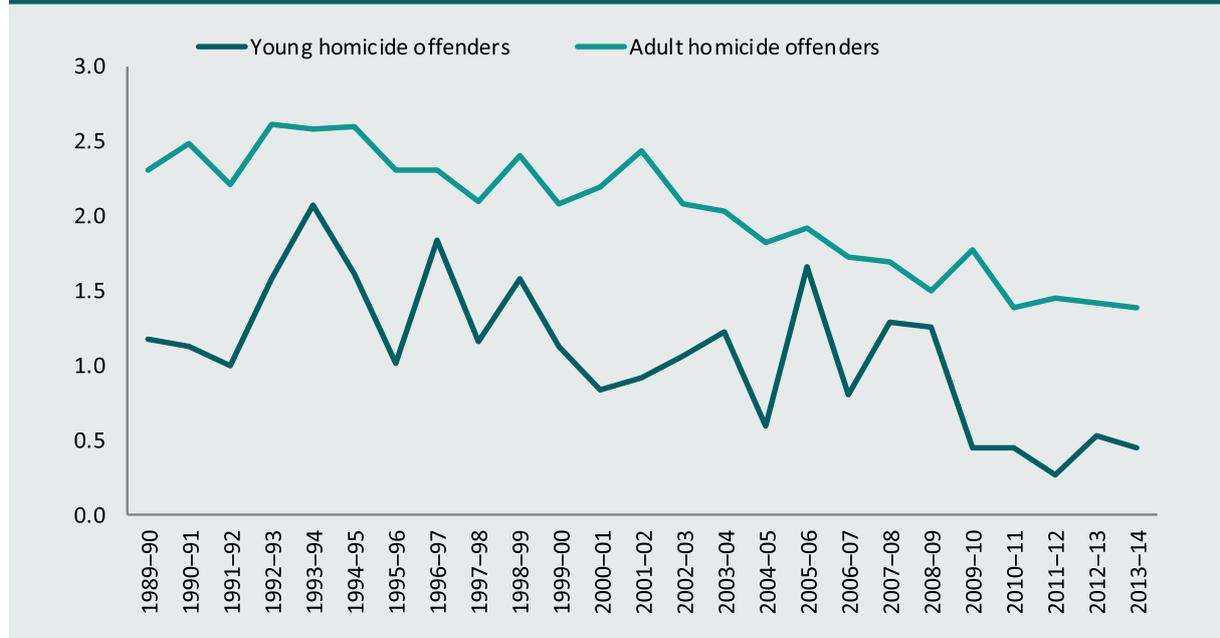
Incidence of young offender homicide incidents

Of the 6,544 homicide incidents that occurred between 1989–90 and 2013–14 where an offender was identified, 410 (6%) involved an offender aged 10–17 years. In these homicide incidents, 575 offenders were identified and 422 victims were killed.

Young homicide offenders represented seven percent of all identified homicide offenders. The number of young homicide offenders fluctuated over the 25-year reference period. On average, 23 offenders aged 10–17 years were charged with homicide each year between 1989–90 and 2013–14.

The offending rate among young people was similarly variable, affected by the small number of offenders (see Figure 1). The rate reached a peak in 1993–94 at 2.1 per 100,000, just below the rate for adult offenders in the same year (2.6 per 100,000). It dropped after 2008–09 to 0.5 or less per 100,000. The offending rate for young people decreased by two-thirds (63%) over the reference period (1.2 to 0.4 per 100,000), compared with a 40 percent decrease in the adult offending rate (2.3 to 1.4 per 100,000).

Figure 1: Homicide offender rate, 1989–90 to 2013–14 (per 100,000)



Note: Excludes 138 offenders whose age was unknown at the time of data collection
Source: ABS 2016; AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2013–14 [computer file]

Characteristics of young homicide offenders

The majority of young homicide offenders were male (88%; n=507) and aged 16–17 years (72%; n=416; see Table 1). Ten offenders (2%) were aged 10–12 years. Female young offenders tended to be younger than their male peers. Three-quarters of male younger offenders (n=373; 74%) were aged 16–17 years compared with 63 percent of female young offenders (n=43). Over a third of young female homicide offenders (35%; n=24) were aged 13–15 years compared with a quarter of young male homicide offenders (25%; n=125).

Nearly a quarter of young homicide offenders were Indigenous (24%; n=138) compared with less than a fifth of adult homicide offenders (16%; n=1,177). Six in 10 Indigenous young homicide offenders were aged 16–17 years (62%; n=85) compared with 76 percent (n=331) of non-Indigenous young offenders. A fifth of young Indigenous homicide offenders were aged 15 years (21%; n=29).

Table 1: Young homicide offenders by age and gender, 1989–90 to 2013–14

	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
10–12	9	1.8	1	1.5	10	1.7
13–15	125	24.7	24	35.3	149	25.9
16–17	373	73.6	43	63.2	416	72.3
Total	507		68		575	
Mean age	15.9		15.7		15.9	

Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2013–14 [computer file]

Over one-third of all young homicide offenders had a prior criminal history (35%; n=201); however, prior criminal history was unknown for another 163 young offenders (28%). Where the type of previous criminal offending was known and recorded, 30 percent (n=61) of young homicide offenders had been previously convicted of a violent offence, primarily physical assault (n=54), and 19 percent for a property offence (n=38). A very small proportion of young homicide offenders were on bail or probation at the time of the homicide incident (5%; n=26).

Young people charged with homicide offences were equally likely as adult offenders to have been drinking alcohol at the time of the homicide incident (36%; n=205 vs 37%; n=2,737). A fifth of young homicide offenders were also recorded as being under the influence of drugs when they committed the homicide incident (19%; n=111). Around a quarter of adult offenders (24%; n=1,794) were identified by police as having consumed illicit drugs preceding the homicide incident. Data on offender alcohol and other drug use are based on the subjective assessment of investigating officers and generally not confirmed by toxicological information. Thus findings may underestimate the proportion of offenders who consumed alcohol or drugs prior to the homicide incident.

Single versus group offending

Half of homicide incidents that involved a young offender were committed by the young person acting alone (51%; n=218). When young offenders killed with others, they tended to co-offend in groups that involved adults (34% of all homicide incidents; n=138) rather than with other young people (13%; n=54). Homicide incidents committed by groups that comprised only young offenders generally involved two offenders (63%; n=34). In comparison, three or more offenders characterised the majority of homicide incidents committed by mixed young/adult offender groups (64%; n=88).

Young males predominantly committed homicide alone (n=186) or with adult male offenders (n=112). Young female offenders were equally likely to commit homicide alone (n=32) or in mixed-gender groups with adult co-offenders (n=26). There was no significant association between age and whether the young offender committed homicide alone or in a group.

Half of homicide incidents perpetrated by a young offender involved a single victim and offender (52%; n=213) and in almost half multiple offenders killed a single victim (46%; n=188). Only a small number of incidents resulted in the death of multiple victims—four incidents were committed by two or more offenders and five incidents by offenders acting alone.

Age of victims

Adults (18 years and over) were killed in the majority of homicide incidents involving young homicide offenders (78%; n=321). Children (under 10 years) were killed in four percent of incidents (n=17) and young people (10–17 years) in 17 percent of incidents (n=70). Differences were found in the age of homicide victims depending on whether they were killed by a single young offender or a group of young offenders (see Table 2). The proportion of homicide incidents perpetrated by a single young offender and resulting in the death of a child or young person (29%; n=64) was double or more the proportion of homicide incidents perpetrated by multiple young offenders (15%; n=8) or groups of young and adult homicide offenders (11%; n=15).

Adult victims of multiple young offenders also tended to be older than adults killed by groups of young and adult offenders. Fifty-nine percent (n=32) of homicide incidents perpetrated by multiple young offenders resulted in the death of an adult aged 35 years and older compared with 35 percent (n=48) of homicide incidents perpetrated by young and adult offenders together. Over half of incidents (54%; n=74) perpetrated by mixed young/adult offenders involved the death of a victim aged 18–34 years.

Table 2: Homicide incident characteristics by type of offender group, 1989–90 to 2013–14 (n=410)

	Single young offender (n=218)		Multiple young offenders (n=54)		Mixed young and adult offenders (n=138)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Age of victim						
<1–9	15	7	0	0	2	1
10–17	49	23	8	15	13	9
18–24	49	23	4	7	35	25
25–34	24	11	10	19	39	28
35–49	48	22	13	24	28	20
50–64	22	10	10	19	14	10
65 and over	10	5	9	17	6	4
Unknown	1	<1	0	0	1	1
Relationship						
Domestic	68	31	5	10	13	9
Acquaintance	97	44	13	25	63	46
Stranger	43	20	34	63	60	43
Unknown	10	5	2	4	2	1
Cause of death						
Stab wound	99	45	16	30	41	30
Beating	52	24	29	54	64	46
Gunshot wound	37	17	2	4	16	12
Other ^a	28	13	7	13	13	9
Unknown	2	<1	0	0	4	3
Precipitating crime						
Yes	38	17	30	56	47	34
No	105	48	13	24	62	45
Unknown	75	34	11	20	29	21

a: Includes drug overdose administered by offender, drowning/submersion, pushed from a high place, strangulation/suffocation, smoke inhalation/burns, and other causes (eg hit by a car, etc)

Note: Age of victim and cause of death based on the first recorded victim. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding

Source: AIC NHMP 1989–90 to 2013–14 [computer file]

Relationship, location and motives

Young homicide offenders commonly killed friends and acquaintances. Forty-two percent (n=173) of young offender incidents were classified as acquaintance homicides based on the closest relationship between any victim/offender pairing (see *Methodological considerations*). A third of incidents were classified as stranger homicides (33%; n=137) and a fifth as domestic homicides (21%; n=86). The prevalence of stranger homicides perpetrated by young homicide offenders contrasts with the proportion recorded for all homicide incidents perpetrated by adults in Australia from 1989–90 to 2013–14 (11%; n=691).

Acquaintance homicides were the most common homicide type perpetrated by single young offenders (44%; n=97), followed by domestic homicides (31%; n=68). Half of these domestic homicides were classified as a parricide—that is, the young offender had killed a parent (50%; n=34). In contrast, young homicide offenders who killed together most commonly targeted strangers (63%; n=34). Acquaintance and stranger homicides accounted for similar proportions of homicide incidents committed by mixed young and adult offender groups (46% (n=63) vs 43% (n=60)).

A larger proportion of single young offender homicides occurred in a residential setting (52%; n=113) compared with homicides involving multiple young offenders (35%; n=19) and mixed young/adult offenders (35%; n=49). Conversely, group-perpetrated homicides primarily occurred in a public location, usually a street or other open area—43% percent (n=23) for multiple young offender homicides and 41% percent (n=57) for mixed young/adult offenders.

Homicide incidents perpetrated by young offenders tended to be motivated by some form of argument, as are the greater proportion of homicides occurring in Australia (see Bryant & Bricknell 2017). Disputes over money or an unspecified disagreement pre-empted over a third of multiple young offender (37%; n=20) and mixed young/adult offender homicide incidents (36%; n=49). Just under a third of homicides involving single young offenders, however, were preceded by an unspecified or domestic argument (32%; n=70).

Cause of death

Stabbings and beatings were the most frequent causes of death in homicide incidents perpetrated by young homicide offenders. Victims died from a stab wound in 38 percent (n=156) of such incidents and from being beaten in 35 percent (n=145) of homicide incidents. Beating deaths were more common in homicides perpetrated by young offenders compared with homicides perpetrated by adults (27%; n=1,649).

There was a significant association between cause of death and if the young offender perpetrated the homicide alone or with others ($\chi^2=31.65$, d.f.=2, $p<0.01$). In most incidents involving groups of young offenders, the victim died from a beating (54%; n=29). The largest proportion of incidents involving young and adults co-offending together was also characterised by a beating death (46%; n=64). Conversely, in homicide incidents perpetrated by a sole young offender, stab wounds was the leading cause of death (45%; n=99).

Homicide in the course of another crime

A precipitating crime characterised 28 percent (n=115) of homicide incidents involving young offenders. The majority were committed in the course of another violent offence (79%; n=91), usually an armed robbery (60%; n=69). Ten percent of homicide incidents (n=12) occurred during a sexual assault.

Co-offending was significantly associated with homicides preceded by another crime ($\chi^2=27.17$, d.f.=2, $p<0.01$). Over half of all homicide incidents (56%; n=30) committed by multiple young offenders occurred in the course of another crime, compared with a third of homicide incidents perpetrated by mixed aged groups (34%; n=47). The most common precipitating crime for both groups of offenders was armed robbery (60% (n=18) and 64% (n=30) respectively). Young people acting alone were less likely to commit homicides in the context of another crime (17%; n=38).

Use of alcohol

Alcohol-related arguments were evenly distributed between young offender homicide incidents and homicide incidents involving adult perpetrators (10% (n=42) vs 12% (n=760)). However, homicide incidents involving multiple young co-offenders were infrequently motivated by an alcohol-related argument (4%; n=2) compared with one in 10 incidents perpetrated by single young offenders (11%; n=25) and mixed young and adult offenders (11%; n=15). Alcohol use by at least one young offender characterised a similar proportion of single versus group homicide incidents. A third of single young offenders were identified as having consumed alcohol prior to the homicide incidents (34%; n=75). At least one young offender who co-offended with other young people had consumed alcohol in 31 percent (n=17) of homicide incidents and those who co-offended with adults in 38 percent of incidents (n=53).

Discussion

Homicide committed by young persons is a rare event in Australia. Six percent of all homicide incidents occurring between 1989–90 and 2013–14 involved at least one offender aged 10–17 years. Seven percent of all known offenders were in this age group.

The current study indicated that young homicide offenders in Australia were equally likely to commit homicide on their own as they were in a group. This finding contrasted with adult homicide offenders, who primarily kill by themselves, and young homicide offenders described in other research (Carcach 1997; Heide & Sellers 2014; Rodway et al. 2011; Woodworth, Agar & Coupland 2013). When young offenders killed with others, it was usually with adults rather than with other young people, irrespective of their gender.

Victims killed in homicide incidents perpetrated by single young offenders were more likely than those killed in multiple offender incidents to have a family or domestic relationship with the offender, and more likely to die from a stab wound. Arguments preceded the majority of these homicides, which were often of a domestic nature and/or exacerbated by alcohol. Half of single young homicide offender incidents were characterised by the offender having consumed alcohol prior to the homicide event.

The commission of a crime, usually robbery, preceded most of the homicide incidents committed by multiple young offenders, who largely killed in pairs and targeted strangers. Incidents in which young people offended with adults mostly involved three or more offenders. The majority of victims killed by multiple offenders died from a beating, irrespective of group composition. Of note is that alcohol played a much less common precipitating role in these homicides, with just a third of incidents in either group having an indication the young person had used alcohol.

Previous examinations of co-offending suggest that offence type, along with age and gender (depending on the study), independently predicted rates of co-offending (see, for example, Carrington 2009, 2002; Piquero, Farrington & Blumstein 2007; Reiss & Farrington 1991; van Mastrigt & Farrington 2009). Co-offending was generally more frequent in the commission of more serious crimes, among younger persons (under 26 years but particularly for those aged under 18 years) and where female offenders were involved. These findings suggest that both the functional requirements of specific crimes (serious violence and/or complex offences) and peer influence (young age) promoted co-offending (Carrington 2002).

Neither age nor gender in this study had an association with whether the offender committed the homicide on their own or in a group. Thus 10–14 year olds were no more likely to co-offend than offenders aged 15–17 years, and young females were no more likely to co-offend than young males.

The relationship between co-offending and the commission of a serious crime prior to the homicide does align with co-offending theories. However, it is the nature of the precipitating crime, rather than the homicide itself, which may be affecting group offending, at least among multiple young homicide offenders.

Due to the nature of the data, homicides involving less well understood cohorts of young offenders could not be further explored. Little is known, for example, outside studies such as Heide and Sellers (2014), about homicide offending among young females, largely due to the very small number of homicides committed by this group. Equally interesting to explore are events in which young co-offenders combine with adults to commit homicide, and the circumstances and dynamics that encourage group formation and commission of violent offences. A final area worthy of fuller examination is the motivations for homicides perpetrated by young offenders. Even apparently observable precursors to the homicide event, such as a domestic argument, cannot fully capture the complexity of provocations leading to the homicide. Combining quantitative data with qualitative insight may provide additional detail on motivations and further test theories around peer influence, groupthink and co-offending dynamics among young offenders and propensity to commit homicide.

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