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Serial Homicide in Australia, 1820-2020

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ABSTRACT

Serial homicide attracts significant attention from the media, entertainment industries, the criminal justice system, and related disciplines even though it accounts for less than 1% of all homicides in Australia. Despite this interest, there is a shortage of research on serial murder specifically applicable to Australia. This study provides an overview of Australian serial homicide, reporting on characteristics related to the victims, perpetrators, and features of the crime. The sample is the largest ever examined in Australia and consists of 71 serial homicides, with 317 victims, committed by 82 perpetrators where each committed at least two homicides. By examining the Australian National Homicide Monitoring Program, the Radford and Florida Gulf Coast University Serial Killer Database, court transcripts, textbooks, and media reports, the authors tabulated offence variables including the number of victims, number of offenders, and motive.

Key Words: Australia, Serial homicide, Serial killers, Victims, Solved homicides.

INTRODUCTION

Serial homicide in Australia is rare and consequently has attracted minimal research. The few studies that have been completed document information such as perpetrator characteristics, modus operandi, motivation, signature behaviours, and details of the victims' cause of death. Despite the relative dearth of research on the subject, perhaps owing to the low base rate, serial murder has featured as a type of homicide in Australia's history and as such is important to examine. To date studies have reported lower base rates than those found in this investigation, and thus this paper constitutes the most thorough and comprehensive review of Australian serial homicides from 1820-2020, providing an up-to-date overview of the topic and extending upon previous studies (Mouzos & West, 2007; Pinto & Wilson, 1990). The National Homicide Monitoring Program provided data from 1989-2016 and additional data was accessed through the Radford and Florida Gulf Coast University Serial Killer Database, court records via the Australian Legal Information Institute (AustLii), relevant media and other written works.

DEFINING SERIAL HOMICIDE

According to Kraemer, Lord and Heilbrun (2004), "most definitions of serial homicide include three elements: the number of victims, time [between incidents], and motivation" (p. 326). Although perhaps true in the past, modern definitions typically only cover two features: the number of victims and time between incidents. According to most authors, the minimum number of victims for a perpetrator to be classified as a serial murderer is two, and this is the victim count now accepted by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (Morton & Hills, 2005). Herein serial homicide is defined as "the killing of two or more victims by the same offender(s); where the offences have been reliably linked; where there is a non-offending period between

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offences; and the motive for these offences is personal, rather than corporate, organisational, or institutional in nature" (Petherick, Bose, McKinley & Skrapec, in press).

VICTIM CHARACTERISTICS OF SERIAL HOMICIDE

Mouzos and West (2007) found that between July 1989 and June 2006 most Australian serial homicide victims were female ($n = 33$, 63%), Caucasian (where race was known), and strangers to their perpetrators (where relationship was known; $n = 25$, 51%). Numbers and percentages have been provided in all places where they were provided by the author. They also found that the mean age of serial homicide victims was 31.5 years, supporting an earlier study by Pinto and Wilson (1990) finding that between July 1900 and June 1990 most Australian serial homicide victims were female (where gender was known; $n = 40/64$, 63%). Pinto and Wilson discovered 17 incidents in total, five of which were unsolved at time of publication.

Regarding victim gender, race, and relationship to perpetrator, Australian findings support those conducted in the United States, Italy, Germany, and England (Miller, 2014; Pakkanen et al., 2015; Sorochinski & Salfati, 2010: female victims: 52-88%, Caucasian victims: 53-80%, stranger victims: 54-90%). Some authors provided a more general response (e.g., stated that most victims were female). However, they only partially support the findings of a South African study (Salfati et al., 2015: female victims: 65%, stranger victims: 73%; Caucasian victims: 8%) likely because, unlike the populations of the other countries mentioned, most of South Africa's population is black.

Regarding the average age of victims, Mouzos and West's (2007) findings are similar to those of overseas research, which report mean ages from 25-35 years (Miller, 2014; Pakkanen et al., 2015; Salfati et al., 2015; Sorochinski & Salfati, 2010). Many of these studies also reported that most victims were young and/or middle-aged adults (Miller, 2014: Pakkanen et al., 2015; Salfati et al., 2015).

PERPETRATOR CHARACTERISTICS OF SERIAL HOMICIDE

Mouzos and West (2007) found that most serial killers were male ($n = 12/13$, 92%), acting alone ($n = 9/13$, 69%), and unemployed when apprehended (where employment status was known; number and percentage not provided). These findings generally align with those from the earlier study by Pinto and Wilson (1990), which found that most serial killers were male ($n = 12/15$, 80%) and employed when apprehended (where status was known; $n = 11/12$, 92%). A problem discovered in this study is that two separate sets of variables are used to analyse victims and offenders and they do not provide enough points of commonality for comparison.

Regarding serial killer gender and number, Australian findings support those of overseas studies (Fox & Levin, 2015; Salfati et al., 2015; Sorochinski & Salfati, 2010: male: 83-100%, acting alone: 72%). Regarding perpetrator employment, however, the level of support is less clear, with all overseas studies finding that most serial killers were employed at the time of the homicides (53-67%) (Salfati et al., 2015). Whether all these perpetrators were still employed when apprehended is unknown.

Other perpetrator characteristics examined in the overseas literature include intelligence, race, marital status, criminal history, and age. Aamodt et al. (2007) found that most serial killers were moderately intelligent (IQ of 90-109; 68%) and Caucasian (74%). Additionally, Salfati and Bateman (2005) found that most serial killers were single at the time of the homicides (70%) and had a previous criminal history (78%). They also found that most serial killers in their sample were young or middle-aged adults at time of first offence ($mean_{age}$ = 32) and arrest ($mean_{age}$ = 33). These findings support the findings of other overseas studies (Godwin, 2008; Harbort & Mokros, 2001; Hickey, 2009; Kraemer et al., 2004; Pakhomou, 2004; Salfati & Bateman, 2005; Salfati et al., 2015; Snook et al., 2005; Walsh, 2005: moderately intelligent: 62-68%, Caucasian: 61-82%, single: 57-70%, previous criminal history: 81-89%, $mean_{age}$ at first homicide: 28-29, $mean_{age}$ at arrest: 30-33). The partial exception is a study by Salfati et al. (2015), which found that most serial killers were black (67%).

Critically, previous research has not examined the type of employment of serial killers, which may be vital in either facilitating their modus operandi or influencing their 'hunting' 'dumping' or 'killing' ground (for example, blue-collar labourers, white-collar professionals, related to the business of security or law enforcement, etc.). Moreover, previous research has discussed levels of education and offenders' intelligence, yet very little is demonstrated regarding their actual education (Harbort & Mokros, 2001; Winerman, 2004). A question for future consideration is whether serial killers have their intelligence fostered through formal education or whether they are naturally intelligent yet poorly educated, or perhaps "street smart" as opposed to what is typically classified as intelligent.

INCIDENT CHARACTERISTICS OF SERIAL HOMICIDE

Mouzos and West (2007) found that most serial homicides involved a sexual element (n = 6/11, 55%) where information was known. This included evidence that one or more victims were sexually assaulted, or where crime scene evidence identified things such as removal of underwear, exposure of genitals, removal of genitals, or stabbing the genital region. They also discovered victims being killed with a knife (most common method; n = 5/9, 56%) or via strangulation (second most common; n = 3/9, 27%), with victims being abducted from an outdoor location. They also found that serial homicides, where motive/intent was known (10/11 cases), were committed for financial gain (n = 3/10, 30%; 6/13 perpetrators), due to hatred (n = 3/10, 30%; 6/13 perpetrators), or for psychosexual reasons (n = 3/10, 30%; 3/13 perpetrators). Similarly, Pinto and Wilson (1990) found that serial homicides where the method of killing was known (16/17 cases) involved the use of a knife (second most common; n = 4/16; 25%) or strangulation (most common method; n = 9/16; 56%). They also found that most victims, where the method of death was known (97/101 victims), were killed via neglect/starvation (most common method; n = 37/97, 38%) or strangulation (second most common; n = ~30/97, ~31%).

Regarding the presence of a sexual element, Mouzos and West's (2007) findings contrast with those of Jenkins (1992; 11/30 series; 37%). Furthermore, they cannot be directly compared to the findings of other overseas studies due to measurement differences [i.e.,

Mouzos and West (2007) used number of series, while other studies used number of victims]. These studies found that most serial homicide victims' deaths involved a sexual element (Kraemer et al., 2004: at least 66%; Salfati & Bateman, 2005: at least 61%; Salfati et al., 2015: 66%). Regarding motive, as above, Mouzos and West's (2007) findings cannot be directly compared to the findings from non-Australian studies due to measurement differences.

Regarding the method of killing, Pinto and Wilson's (1990) findings contrast to those from overseas research which have consistently found firearms (Fox & Levin, 2015: 39%; Salfati et al., 2015: 30%; Santtila et al., 2008: 47%) or strangulation (Harbort & Mokros, 2001: 33%; Sorochinski & Salfati, 2010: 49%+) to be the most common method of killing, most likely a result of differential access to firearms comparative to Australia. They have also found blunt instruments (Salfati et al., 2015: 28%), firearms (Harbort & Mokros, 2001: 24%), sharp objects/knives (Santtila et al., 2008: 29%; Sorochinski & Salfati, 2010: 19%+), or strangulation (Fox & Levin, 2015: 39%) to be the second most common. No known overseas studies have examined abduction site. Regarding other incident characteristics, Salfati et al. (2015) found that most victims were killed outside (78%). Similarly, Santtila et al. (2008) found that most serial homicide victims were found at the scene of the murder (74%) and were found outdoors (64%). This supports findings from other overseas studies (Pakkanen et al., 2015; Salfati & Bateman, 2005; Sorochinski & Salfati, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

Aim

This study aimed to identify the incidence of serial homicide in Australia from 1 January 1820 to 31 January 2020 using only solved cases. The authors sought to identify the common characteristics of Australian serial homicide victims, perpetrators, and incidents. The study analysed all recorded solved serial homicides by date, the number of victims and perpetrators involved, demographics, the recorded motivation, cause of death and, whether there was a sexual element involved.

Case Identification

Solved serial homicide cases were identified using the Aamodt Radford/FGCU Serial Killer Database (2018). A review of extant Australian peer-reviewed literature on serial homicides (Pinto & Wilson, 1990; Mouzos & West, 2007) was conducted, as was a review of the National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP) annual reports from 1989-2016. Multiple online engines/databases, such as Google (including Google Scholar, Google Books and Google News Archive) and Trove (the Australian National Library's database aggregator) were also used.

Inclusion Criteria

Solved serial homicide cases were considered eligible for inclusion in the study if they met the following criteria:

(a) The first murder in the series occurred after 1 January 1820.

(b) The last murder in the series occurred before 31 January 2020.

(c) The perpetrator(s) killed at least two victims in separate incidents.

(d) At least two reliable sources mentioning the case could be located (e.g., court documents, historical documents, peer-reviewed journal articles, or NHMP annual reports).

Case Details

Once the cases were identified, the following information was compiled for each solved serial homicide. The year of perpetrator's first and last known murder, total number of perpetrators, gender of perpetrator(s), age of perpetrator(s) at time of first offence, racial appearance of perpetrator(s), total number of victims, gender of victims, age of victims at time of death, race of victims, motive of perpetrator, method(s) of killing used, whether or not a sexual element was present, and any victim vulnerabilities. (When the age of the victim or perpetrator was unavailable, their birth date was recorded along with the date they were killed or the date of their first and last offence.)

The initial intention was to collect data on all victim, perpetrator, and incident characteristics previously examined in the literature. However, preliminary searches indicated that information on some variables (e.g., perpetrator employment and marital status) was unavailable, so these were excluded from the analysis.

Collection Process

Information relating to the variables was collected from the following sources:

a) The first author (AM) was granted access to the Radford and Florida Gulf Coast University Serial Killer Database;
b) Court documents/transcripts available through the Australian Legal Information Institute (austlii.edu.au);
c) Peer-reviewed journal articles by Pinto and Wilson (1990) and Mouzos and West (2007);
d) Open source books examining Australian serial homicide (e.g., Kidd, 2001, 2011; Morton & Lobez, 2009); and
e) Newspaper articles found through Trove, Google, and the Google News Archive.

Information was only used when found in at least two sources, except for data found in court documents. When information was conflicting (e.g., two sources stated that the victim was 23 and three stated that they were 27), the decision on what piece of information to retain (or whether to retain both) was made based on the reliability of the sources and/or the number of sources that reported each piece of data.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 25) for Windows 10. Frequencies and descriptive statistics were generated for all variables. Measures of central tendency, standard deviations (SDs), minimums, and maximums were calculated for several variables, including perpetrator age (time of first and last offence) and victim age (time of death).

RESULTS

Solved Serial Homicide Series
Incidence

Seventy-one solved serial homicide series involving 317 victims and 82 perpetrators were identified in total. The mean number of victims killed in a series was 4.46 (*SD* = 4.52, *median* = 4.69, *range* = 35, minimum = 2, maximum = 37), while the mean duration of a series was 5.56 years (SD = 7.77, *median* = 5.75, *range* = 39, minimum = 1, maximum = 40). As exact dates for each homicide were not provided in the data, the number of years an offender was active is an approximate range based on the most accurate information for first and last offences.

The higher peaks occurring in 1890-1899 and 1900-1909 (Figure 1) relate to the deaths of 52 children at the hands of baby farmers (Sarah and John Makin; Alice Mitchell, respectively) as well as the poisoning of siblings (Martha Needle). During 1910-1919 there were no records of any serial murders, possibly due to Australia's involvement in World War 1 (1914-1918), when the men who may have killed in Australia were deployed elsewhere and Australian police were engaged in other activities and therefore investigations or records were not given priority.
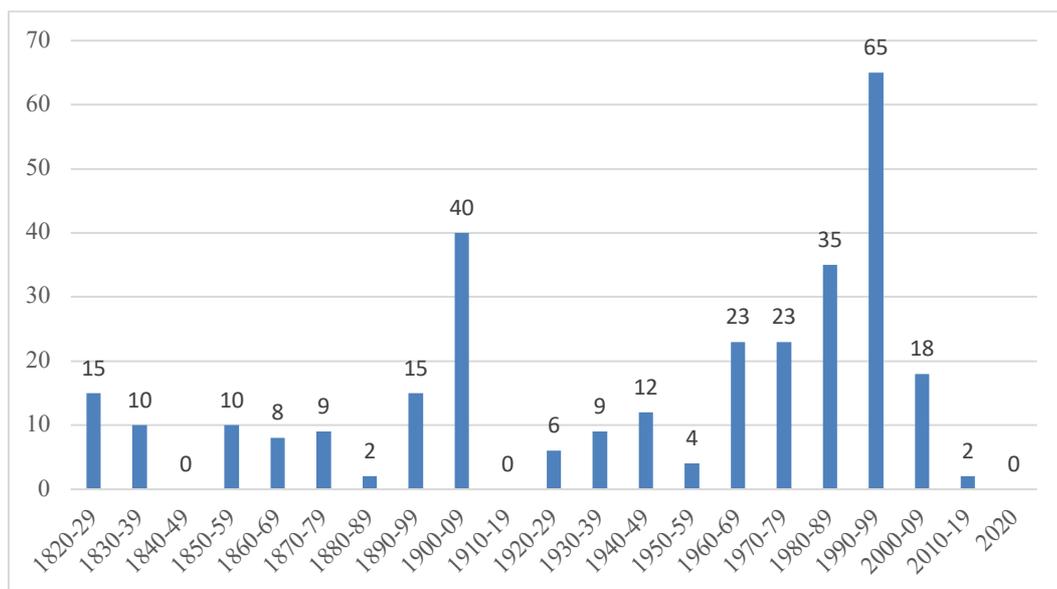

Figure 1: Number of Australian solved serial homicide victims by decade

From 1960-1999, Australia experienced significant social changes, such as the Vietnam War, the introduction of female contraception, the 'free-love' movement and the ability of large numbers of people to travel by commercial flights. Drugs also had a significant impact on Australian society.

More recently, from 2010-2019, technology, mobile phones, social media and greater acceptance of prostitution and deviant sexual activities available live online (where participants in these acts do not even have to physically meet) allows potential sexual perpetrators to satisfy their needs without the non-consensual elements of abduction and rape previously seen.

Victim Characteristics

Serial offenders killed only females in 23 offences (32.4%), both males and females were victimised at the same rate as females only (n = 23, 32.4%), with only males being the victim in 17 cases (23.9%). Males and unknown were victims in two cases (2.8%), and females and unknown were victims in one case (1.4%). The victim's sex was unknown in five cases (7.8%). The average number of victims killed was 4.73 (SD = 4.71, range = 35, minimum = 2, maximum = 37).

Victims were mostly Caucasian (n = 47, 66.2%), though a large percentage of the victim race information was unknown (n = 16, 22.5%). Mixed race victims were recorded in seven of the offences (9.9%), while Indigenous offenders were only represented in one case (1.4%). Victims were mostly adults (n = 147, 46.4%), followed by babies (n = 50, 15.7%), then children and teenagers (both n = 28, 8.8%). Further descriptive statistics for age will be less meaningful because victim age was unknown in many cases (n = 64, 20.2%).

The number of victims killed by each murderer or group was significantly weighted at the lower victim count, with higher victim counts being less common. Two victims, the minimum victim count to be considered a serial offence, were killed in 21 of the cases. Three victims were killed in 15 cases, four victims in 13 cases, five victims in 11 cases. Seven victims were murdered in three cases and nine in two cases. Six, eight, 10, 11, 12, and 13 victims were murdered in one case each.

Perpetrator Characteristics

The vast majority of serial homicide perpetrators were male (n = 56, 78.9%), with eight female offenders (11.3%). Multiple male offenders feature in four cases (5.6%), male and females in two cases (2.8%), and multiple males and females in only one case (1.4%). Solo offenders were the most prevalent (n = 63, 88.77%), with two offenders in six cases (8.5%), and three and four offenders in one case each (1.4%). The age of first offence was as low as 16 years and as high as 68 years, and the age at last offence was as low as 16 years and as high as 77 years.

As with victims, most offenders were Caucasian (n = 66, 93%), with two Indigenous offenders (2.8%), one European (1.4%), one Lebanese (1.4%) and one of unknown race (1.4%). The number of years active was recorded for 68 of the offence series with this information missing in three cases. Most offenders were active for one year or less (n = 24, 35.3%), followed by two years (n = 12, 16.9%), three years in seven of the cases, four years and 11 years in four cases, five years in three cases, eight, 10, and 27 years in four cases each (5.6%), and six, seven, nine, 13, 16, 25, 28, and 40 years in one case each (1.4% for each; M = 5.56 years, SD = 7.77, range = 39, minimum = 1, maximum = 40).

Incident Characteristics

Methods of Killing

As expected, there was significant variability in killing methods. Some methods occurred infrequently – neglect, vehicular, drugging, and decapitation occurred only once each (1.4%). Punching occurred in three cases (4%) and drowning in two cases (2.8%). Other methods were more prevalent. Sharp force was the most common (n = 31, 43.6%), followed by blunt force (n = 29, 40.8%), strangulation (n = 21, 29.5%), shooting (n = 198, 25.4%), smothering (n = 7, 9.9%), and poisoning (n = 5, 7%).

Sexual Element and Motivation

Despite previous assertions that serial murderers are regularly sexual offenders (Miller, 2014; Seltzer, 2013) the number of cases within this data set with and without sexual elements were relatively balanced, however, in six cases (8.5%), the sexual element was unknown. There were 28 cases without a sexual element and 37 cases with (39.4% and 52.1% respectively). A sexual element was recorded when there was evidence that one or more victims were sexually assaulted, or there were sexual overtones within the crime scene (e.g., genitals were exposed or stabbed).

Further descriptive statistics for motive may not be particularly instructive as individual offences may have multiple motives or multiple motives over multiple offences. Because of this, only frequencies and percentages are presented. It should also be noted that motivation is notoriously difficult to infer, and this was possibly reflected in the current data set with 18 of the 64 cases (25.3%) reporting an unknown motive. Anger was the most common motive after unknown, found in 19 cases (26.7%), followed by profit (n = 15, 21.1%), psychosexual motivation (n = 13, 18.3%), then pleasure (n = 10, 14.1%). Following these were the less common motives of crime concealment (n = 5, 7%), personal gain (n = 5, 9.7%), thrill (n = 4, 5.6%), theft, jealousy, and revenge in two cases each (2.8%), and power motive in one case (2.4%).

<div align="center">DISCUSSION</div>

The data did not reveal any discernible patterns between the number of victims, the number of offenders, and motives. One series with four motives included five victims for one offender, while another with two motives included 11 victims for three offenders. In the case with the highest victim count (n = 37) the motive was listed as unknown for all victims, though this is likely due to the deaths occurring between 1822-1906. Determining the motive during this time may not have been particularly important for police or the courts, or the psychological features of motive may have been poorly understood. Because of large absence of this data, no further analysis of the link between number of victims, offenders, and motives was undertaken.

Results demonstrate more females than males and more strangers than intimate partners and acquaintances have been victim to Australian serial killers during the past 200 years, and this finding is consistent with other research where females are targeted more than males. Specifically, males are more likely to target females, and females are more likely to target familiars usually in so called "carer" crimes such as health care workers (Harrison, Hughes &

Gott, 2019). This was also found in the current study. Results for the age of victims was as expected, with a caveat, as it was only recorded for 188 out of 317 victims (59% of the sample), thus there is a large amount of missing data (one-third). For the 59% of cases where age was available, there were 30 victims under 10 years, 31 between 10-18 years, 62 between 18-30 years, 20 between 30-40 years, and 45 over 40 years. For the 188 victims with a known age, the average age was 26.40 years.

Many of the cases involving missing data occurred early in the history of the sample, perhaps as expected. For example, the case of Alice Mitchell, who killed 37 victims, was simply discussed in the legal transcripts using language of the time as involving the murder of infants. There was no specific mention of age for any of the victims in any of the available documents. Modern criminal justice systems (investigations and courts) are much more data driven now than at previous times and more information regarding cases is likely required in order to secure a conviction in modern times. Thus, earlier historical data is less feature rich.

Perpetrators of serial homicide had a mean age of 30.37 years at the time of their first offence (n = 60). However, the mean age at first offence was only calculated for those cases with one offender, inclusive of both male and female offenders, and thus cases involving multiple offenders were excluded so as not to skew the data. As such, caution should be exercised before drawing any conclusions about the age of serial murderers. The expectation that most serial killers would be male, Caucasian and acting alone, was supported. While these data show that the average age of Australian serial murderers is general the same as their international counterparts, judicious interpretation of the missing information is warranted.

The results demonstrated that most victims were killed by sharp or blunt force (n=31 and 29 respectively), which generally comports to the other Australian research, though differs slightly from the international research where firearms play more of a role. This is likely explained by the differential access to firearms in Australia relative to other countries, especially for those offences after 1997 following the Port Arthur incident. Perpetrators commonly targeted victims because they were vulnerable due to age, gender, relationship to the perpetrator or employment, which is again in line with previous literature (Hickey, 2009). Perpetrators appeared able to focus on specific factors that made victims susceptible to initial targeting, such as being children in the perpetrator's care, being alone in public spaces, or hitchhiking/backpacking and accepted a lift from the perpetrator.

As this is the first research of its scale and type in Australia, this paper will naturally raise more questions than it answers. This study should be used as a starting point from which to base future research to identify trends and issues related to serial homicide. New topics such as victim targeting and the abduction site, perpetrators' cooling-off periods (such as whether perpetrators actually cool-off), missing persons as victims of serial killers, and motivations should be considered.

Conclusion

Historically, due to the small number of Australian victims, this field of research has been under-studied (Pinto & Wilson, 1990; Mouzos & West, 2007; Scerra, 2009). Researching

this area in Australian homicide has highlighted gaps in knowledge, especially concerning victims and vulnerabilities. Over the 200 years examined in this study, there were 71 serial homicides, with 317 victims, committed by 82 or more perpetrators representing less than 1% of the total number of homicide victims. Most victims were vulnerable due to their isolation, gender, age, drug and alcohol use or mental health issues.

The chance of becoming a victim of a serial killer is quite low. However, the authors believe that it was critical to review the history of this phenomenon, test assumptions and understand victim vulnerabilities by highlighting patterns and trends for this crime type. It is critical for this applied research to add to the knowledge base and apprise police education, training and investigative practice.

This study mapped Australian serial homicide over time and reported on characteristics related to the victims, perpetrators, and features of the crime. Determining the similarities to previous international studies helped identify what was unique to serial homicide in the Australian context. These results and lines of inquiry may lead to a greater level of understanding from the criminal justice system and potentially decrease the average detection time from first killing to apprehension.

This study is the largest of its kind in Australia. It systematically recorded critical information for each recorded solved serial homicide and the factors that made up those crimes. It found similarities to extant research, such as most serial killers are male and most of their victims are females, however, it also found differences, such as victim's age. Future research will identify the specific vulnerabilities of the victims of Australian serial offenders and compare them within an international context. Although the number of serial homicide events has decreased during the past few decades in Australia, the question of whether this could change remains.

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