

The 'dark figure of homicide': unreported Australian homicide

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Research Article

ABSTRACT

Unreported Australian homicides have not been discussed in Australian publications for over 20 years. Unreported homicides or the dark figure of homicide are homicides that go unreported by official sources hiding them from investigators and tracking. Although unreported homicides are difficult to quantify, this article demonstrates that there is a great likelihood of Australia's annual homicide numbers are actually higher than recorded. This qualitative research highlights specific crime typologies that have possible hidden deceased victims within them due to the complexities of the specific crimes. This research is the first of its kind in contemporary Australia and offers specific new categories for future research.

Keywords: *dark figure of homicide, unreported homicide, hidden crimes, Australian homicide*

INTRODUCTION

Homicide intrigues society with thousands of articles, books, television programs and films with themes of murder. However, there is limited discussion the 'dark figure of homicide' (Brookman, 2022). Brookman defines the dark figure of homicide as homicides that go unreported by official sources making them difficult to investigate, track and understand, particularly for the victim's family. This phenomenon is caused by factors, such as the lack of witnesses, forensic evidence, no human remains, reluctant witnesses, specific detection avoidance strategies by the offender(s) or lack of expertise to investigate.

Bulwer first coined the term the "dark figure of crime" in 1834, in 1897 it was further studied by Rev. Morrison. Biderman re-introduced the concept in 1967 (Becker, 1968), Mouzos stated that "...the serious nature of homicide makes it the

least likely of all offence types to be affected by the “dark figure” of crime – that is, offences that go unreported and undetected” (2003a, p. 1). However, there are numerous categories of interpersonal violent crimes that are more likely than others to be unreported, including, but not limited to, those outlined below.

This article will contemporise Australian literature surrounding unreported homicides since Mouzos’ original commentary in 2002. The homicides considered more likely to escape the attention of authorities are:

1. “Contract killing” where the victim’s body has been successfully disposed of
2. Elder abuse where the death is recorded as accidental
3. Equivocal deaths, manner of death is ambiguous, where the forensic pathologist cannot determine cause of death
4. Honour killings, predominantly of women by family members who feel disgraced by the woman’s actions, perceived or actual (Goldstein, 2002)
5. Human trafficking/people smuggling
6. Infant deaths, “sudden death, cause unknown”
7. ‘Invisible killers’, perpetrators who cannot stand trial due to mental impairment and;
8. Long-term missing persons.

Homicide

The Australian and New Zealand Standard Offence Classification (ANZSOC) classify homicide as “unlawfully kill, attempt to unlawfully kill or conspiracy to kill another person” (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011b, p. 24). Australia’s homicide rate is comparatively low globally and compares favourably to other Western nations (Goldsworthy, 2019). According to ABS data, homicide offences have been falling slowly since 2010, with a jump in 2016 and another small rise in 2019 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020d). Nevertheless, Goldsworthy (2019) also states that “Australia should be confident that it is on the right track with a historically low homicide rate...[h]owever, we must not become complacent. There is always room for improvement when it comes to saving lives” (p. 3).

In contrast, the National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP) has drawn from state and territory policing forces and state coronial records since 1989 (Bricknell, 2020). As homicide is such a serious and impactful crime, it can be used as a societal indicator of crime-associated violence (Serpell, Sullivan and Doherty, 2022). Table 1 outlines the differing statistics between the ABS and the NHMP.

Table 1: Australian homicide rates: a comparison of two data sources 2009-2021¹

Year (ABS CY, NHMP FY)	ABS (Murder only) (2020d)	NHMP (2020)
2010/09-10	460 (233)	260
2011/10-11	470 (245)	236
2012/11-12	449 (246)	247
2013/12-13	434 (245)	249
2014/13-14	423 (242)	238
2015/14-15	418 (233)	227
2016/15-16	453 (227)	229
2017/16-17	430 (208)	231
2018/17-18	377 (219)	196
2019/18-19	415 (225)	224
2020/19-20	396 (221)	261
2021/20-21	370 (193)	No data
Total	5095 (2527)	2598

This table illustrates the difficulties in determining accurate reported data on homicide. There is also no clear pattern of one agency having consistently higher or lower data than the other, as well as the differences being explained by calendar year versus financial year reporting timeframes. In NSW, for example, the Coroner will only investigate deaths that are sudden, unexpected, or unnatural (Coroners Court, 2020). If a death is misclassified or not referred to the Coroner because it is not deemed a reportable death, then there is a chance that homicides are being incorrectly recorded (*Coroners Act 2009*, (NSW) s 6). It is because of this that research into unreported homicides should not stop at academic discussion – but should morph into real-world guidance to assist police, policy makers, and other associated organisations, in planning, intervention and, ultimately, prevention (Quinet, 2007).

¹ The NHMP data does not align with the ABS data, as the ABS data includes attempted murder, where the NHMP makes no mention of it. Even so, ABS data with murder and manslaughter combined do not equate to the NHMP statistics.

Contract homicide

‘Contract homicide’, ‘hitmen’, or ‘murder for hire’ – these are all terms used to describe a situation where a third party is hired by one or more organisers to murder one or more victims, usually with the promise of payment (Mouzos & Venditto, 2003). Between 1 July 1989 and 30 June 2002, Mouzos and Venditto (2003) found that there were approximately 163 known contracts – 94 attempts and 69 completed homicides. Attempted contract homicides were intercepted by police; it is reasonable to surmise, then, that some homicides were stopped, some were completed, and some may have never been detected. It is likely that contract homicides include a proportion of deaths where victims have never been reported missing, their body is never located or they are assumed hiding, so their deaths remain untallied in official statistics.

Palin (2016, p. 2) suggests that the “2003 report for the Australian Institute of Criminology is still one of the most significant pieces of work into contract killings anywhere in the world”. Within it, Mouzos and Venditto (2003, p. 5) write that “[t]he impunity with which the decree of contract murder is issued by the Mafia and other criminal associations around the world has been romanticised somewhat in the modern media portrayals of underworld crime figures”. They then go on to say that “[b]ased on the information that the media uses to inform the public, the public erroneously views contract killings as being characteristic of underworld occurrences...while some contract killings can indeed be described as such, [m]ost are not” (Mouzos & Venditto, 2003, p. 5). Despite media portrayals to the contrary, drug-related motives are one of the *least common* motives in Australia for engaging a contract killer (Mouzos & Venditto, 2003).

Australian contract killing is more likely driven by domestic discord. Mouzos and Venditto (2003, p. 2) found that of 94 attempted contract killings that were reviewed, *none* were associated with organised crime. While thousands of media articles have been written on Melbourne gangland murders, there is very little academic research into the subject. Writing a decade after Mouzos and Venditto’s initial publication, Cameron uses “the term “paid killing”, given that the nature of the crime dictates that it is almost impossible to formulate a binding contract for performance” (Cameron, 2014, p. 28). This makes it difficult to compare contract homicide rates across jurisdictions; in itself, this is a hindrance to proper reporting as there can be no comparative analysis. Given the premeditated and planned nature of contract killings it is possible that these are being carried out without detection, particularly when they are being arranged in a domestic context and organisers have a vested interest in keeping the disappearance unreported. While Australia may be leading the world in its publications on contract homicide, the research is now almost two decades old and lacks international comparison. Further research into this area domestically and internationally may assist in pinpointing

unreported homicide gaps, which in turn serves to better inform prevention and responses to the crime.

Elder abuse

Homicide of elderly people is known as geronticide or senicide and like infants, elders are a vulnerable subset of society. Media attention has remarked that “[e]lder abuse is the perfect crime...victims rarely complain...if they do their complaints are scarcely heard...then they die” (Ibrahim, 2019, para. 1). Rogers and Storey (2019, p. 142) observe that elder homicide is ‘mostly absent in the academic literature’. One of the first problems with identifying misclassified elder abuse deaths is that the definition of ‘elder’ changes on between uses, industries, and countries. Typically, in Australia, ‘older’ Australians are 65 years and over (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2017; Carcach et al., 1998).

Carcach et al. (1998) review homicide of older people mainly in the context of relationship breakdown or homicide during the commission of another crime. They did not review potentially hidden or misclassified homicides. There are also problems in determining homicides from elder abuse because the spectrum for elder abuse is broad for example: physical, financial, and psychological abuse in a range of formats, that does not always result in death (Hullick et al., 2017). The final cause of death can also be varied, meaning that deaths may be recorded under one of many causes of death in statistics.

According to the Australian Law Reform Commission (2017 s 2.27) “[t]he definition of elder abuse does not include all abuse of older persons, but is limited by the relationship between the abuser and the older person – that is, when they are in a relationship where there is an expectation of trust”. This further complicates the ability to determine any misclassified elder abuse deaths, when not only is the death itself in question, but is also heavily reliant on determining the relationship between the victim and offender.

Deaths in residential aged care services (RACS) are also not automatically reportable and can escape scrutiny if it does not trigger another reportable death element (Mitchell, 2018). Mitchell (2018, p. 39) points out that when “the deaths of frail, older persons are inaccurately classified as natural, and any contributing modifiable factors are not identified, avoidable mortality cannot be highlighted and addressed”, including avoidable mortality stemming from elder abuse. He highlights the possibility of using coronial processes to review deaths and uncover elements of elder abuse; however, this is clearly a retrospective and reactive process which is dependent on a death, rather than proactively addressing the abuse before death (Mitchell, 2018). While elder abuse in Australia has attracted considerably more

academic review than some other categories, research into misclassified elder deaths as a result of abuse remains scant.

Equivocal deaths

Elucidating the cause of death is sometimes difficult and equivocal deaths, where the forensic pathologist cannot determine the cause of death do occur. According to Pompili (2009, p. 414) “[a]n equivocal death is one that cannot be neatly categorized as specifically natural, accidental, suicidal, or homicidal. Every death...is classified ... as one of these four modes”. Lacks et al. posit that “a death incorrectly categorized as a suicide might preclude a full investigation that would otherwise uncover that the death was a homicide” (2008, p. 151).

In a study of Australian deaths, Walter et al. (2012) found that inquests were more likely to be held if the victim was a child, and less likely to be held for those 65 years or older. This has ramifications for the elder abuse deaths and infant deaths discussed earlier in that misclassified or equivocal deaths may be more or less likely to be reviewed. Some types of death also had different odds of resulting in an inquest – falls and self-harm had decreased odds of resulting in an inquest, while choking, suffocation, and medical complications all increased the odds of an inquest occurring (Walter et al., 2012).

While an equivocal death may not contain elements of intentional deception, the circumstances of the death may preclude it from being appropriately recorded, thus leaving the victim unaccounted for, and denying families the truth. In an equivocal death investigation, it is important to discover not only the physiological cause of death, but also the manner of death, as discussed earlier. Both elements will assist in determining whether a homicide has occurred. Sometimes, however, “even the most detailed and exhaustive investigation will fail to reveal sufficient information upon which to draw a conclusion as to a manner of death” and so a finding of homicide may never eventuate, contributing to the ‘dark figure’ of crime (Lacks et al., 2008, p. 152).

Honour killings

Kulczycki and Windle (2011, p. 1447) define honour killing as “an intrafamilial murder or attempted murder of a female by a male relative for reasons of honor”; however, Shier and Shor (2016) found defining honour killing was difficult as associated entities could not agree on what constitutes it. Honour killings have alternately been framed internationally as both cultural phenomena and gender-based violence (Ercan, 2015). Honour killing is more similar to a motive for committing murder, rather than the offence itself (Hayes et al., 2018).

Hayes et al., found 16 honour killings in the USA between January 1, 1990 and December 31, 2016 (2018). It stands to reason, that equivalents in Australia would be fewer, taking into account the population differences and levels of violence in each country. Numerous studies cite oft-quoted statistics from the United Nations which suggest 5,000 women and girls are victims of honour killings each year (United Nations Population Fund, 2000). However, there is seemingly little further research into this statistic, and more recent figures are not available. Kulczycki and Windle (2011) observed that primary data on honour killings is rare, and where it exists, determining the accuracy can be complicated. Kulczycki and Windle (2011) also note the likelihood of misreported or unreported honour killings that may never appear in primary or secondary data sources, but contrast this with the problem of duplicated information.

Although research on honour killings worldwide is plentiful, literature surrounding honour killings in Australia is scant. Media coverage and opinions are widely available, but most commentary is related to cases overseas. Asquith (2015) remarks that “[k]nowledge of these violent crimes is limited in Australia, with only the murder of Mohd Shah Saemin coming to the attention of Australian courts and media as an ‘honour killing’”. It could be assumed then that either Australia is free from honour killings; all honour killings are misidentified; or honour killings are within the number of unreported homicides.

Some commentators, however, equate honour killings with homicide as a result of domestic violence, which could greatly expand the dataset if that measure was widely accepted (Honour killing, 2004). Depending on the author, honour killings are sometimes grouped with domestic violence, and sometimes specifically split from it. Kljun (2014, p. 18) differentiates the two by saying that honour killings are “usually planned, it can involve more than one member and the perpetrators are seen to have vindicated the honour of the family within the wider community”.

Arguably, the first two elements can be equally applied to criminotypical domestic violence, but the last element may be specific to honour killings. Further research into honour killings is necessary before it can be determined whether occurrences are minimal, if cases are being misclassified, or if the distinction is useful at all. There are also ongoing debates about whether honour killings should be classed as family and domestic violence (FDV), and this debate alternately swings towards including deaths from elder abuse in FDV (Mitchell, 2018).

Human trafficking and people smuggling²

If victims of human trafficking die prior to reaching Australian territory, then their deaths may not be Australia's to count. However, unless their country of origin or last country of departure tracks their deaths (which is unlikely due to the inherent hidden nature of trafficking and smuggling), then it is not inconceivable that no death is recorded. Australia's legislative controls on human trafficking and people smuggling have been raised relatively recently – within the last two decades. According to Monash University research, there have been approximately 2,030 border-related deaths since 2000, with 1,720 of those occurring en-route and 189 in Australian waters (Border Crossing Observatory, 2021). However, the research has limitations and relies on reported border-related deaths, which include those “en route to Australia...in onshore or offshore detention, during border enforcement operations, in community contexts where there is direct evidence of a link to border control...and following return to countries of origin or transit” (Border Crossing Observatory, 2021, p. 3).

It is suggested that “there is often an overlap between legal migration routes, people smuggling and human trafficking” (Putt, 2007, p. 2). This creates difficulties determining unreported deaths from human trafficking and people smuggling. Determining the limits of either scenario is crucial or may not stretch to include deaths in custody (although, where possible, the Border Crossing Observatory includes deaths in custody). There are also reports that human trafficking cases have increased since Australia's borders reopened following COVID-19 (Down, 2022).

Human trafficking and people smuggling cover two related, yet distinct, offences. However, while both may be recognised, Australian research is lacking, particularly regarding accurate statistics (Schloenhardt et al., 2009). Nevertheless, the Australian Institute of Criminology has estimated that the dark figure of modern slavery victimisation and human trafficking in Australia could be as high as 1:4,

² Article 3 of the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children* (United Nations General Assembly, 2000-b) states that:

“Trafficking in persons” shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.

Article 3 of the *Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air* (United Nations General Assembly, 2000-a) defines people smuggling as:

“Smuggling of migrants” shall mean the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident.

meaning for every known victim there are four unknown victims (Lyneham, Dowling & Bricknell, 2019). There are calls for more research into the area to determine accurate reported and unreported figures to better inform the public, law enforcement agencies, and policy makers (Schloenhardt et al., 2009). Putt (2007, p. 1) argues that “[e]xtreme caution should be exercised in extrapolating from the under-reporting of domestic crimes to transnational crimes, as Australia enjoys the natural protection provided by being both an island and geographically remote and has extensive border protection mechanisms”.

A key example of deaths in people smuggling is that of 39 Vietnamese people in the UK in 2019, known as the ‘Essex Lorry Deaths’ (Gentleman, 2020). Migrants from Vietnam were shipped to the UK in a refrigeration trailer, but ran out of air and suffocated before they could reach Essex (Gentleman, 2020). In early 2021, the two ringleaders were found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to 27 and 20 years in prison respectively (Gentleman, 2021). However, with 39 people in one trailer, it raises the question of how many people smuggling deaths are unreported. This is particularly pertinent for Australia, due to the extreme size of the land and remote areas, also where some people smuggling occurs via boat and which has an easy disposal method for victim bodies.

Crock and Ghezelbash (2010, p. 247) estimate that between December 1998 – December 2001, 891 people died at sea whilst trying to gain asylum in Australia. There are no real statistics of how high this death toll may be. As was found in the Essex Lorry case, ringleaders may be more likely to be found guilty of manslaughter, rather than murder, and it would be incredibly difficult to meet the murder standard of proof when dealing with deaths at sea. Human trafficking and people smuggling may be areas which, although dangerous, are likely to add numbers to the homicide toll because killing victims who are being smuggled or trafficked into Australia reduces income and presumably the ‘trustworthiness’, of involved criminal enterprises, however, does make excellent examples of the lengths the criminals will go to, disposes of chronically sick or injured people as well as ‘troublemakers’.

Infant deaths

Misclassified infant deaths are not a new phenomenon. Archer (2008) explored English infanticide in the 19th century and found suggestions that infant deaths were being deliberately obscured or misclassified, and that many cases did not appear in official homicide statistics. In the cases that Archer (2008) reviewed, he found methods of concealment like false midwife attestations, hidden bodies, deception, and a variety of methods used in the alleged homicides. Infanticide studied in an Australian context identified gaps in the literature, particularly in relation to unreported infanticide (Archer, 2008).

Infant deaths are acknowledged to be an exception to the rule that the dark figure of homicide tends to be less than that of other crimes (Brookman & Nolan, 2006). Brookman and Nolan (2006, p. 875) point out that there are also a variety of scenarios in which an infant death can be classed as accidental but arguably stem from parental negligence, and that “[u]nlike more robust older children or adults, little physical harm is required to kill a young infant...signs of trauma can be much more difficult to detect”. In some cases of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) it is difficult to distinguish whether or not suffocation may have been intentional (Brookman & Nolan, 2006).

Indeed, the authors recognise that “not all suspected cases of infanticide (or any other form of homicide) are ultimately prosecuted; and, of those that are, not all suspects are found guilty” (Brookman & Nolan, 2006, p. 871). In terms of known infanticide cases, only two thirds of male suspects and half of female suspects were found guilty in the United Kingdom between 1995 and 2002 (Brookman & Nolan, 2006, p. 874). Of the 269 cases studied, with 154 male and 115 female perpetrators, only 5.2% of female perpetrator cases resulted in a murder verdict (Brookman & Nolan, 2006, p. 874). Although these cases are reported, the alleged perpetrators are either found not guilty, acquitted or cannot stand trial due to mental impairment so the homicide figures appear skewed.

A large amount of literature examines the misclassification of infants who died due to SIDS. According to Milroy and Kepron (2017, p. 164), there is an “oft-quoted figure” that approximately 10% of infant deaths recorded as SIDS are actually homicides. In Australia, there were 40 deaths due to SIDS in 2019 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020b). If 10% of these were misclassified homicides, it would add another 4 deaths to the homicide count, which would increase the total by approximately 1%. Given that this is such a specific cause of death, this would be a significant contribution to the homicide rate. Actions such as mistreatment, neglect and abuse may also play a significant but not final part in the death of an infant (Brookman & Nolan, 2006). It is these factors combined with the relative ease of harming an infant that may contribute to misclassified deaths that may not form part of official homicide statistics.

‘Invisible killers’

The term ‘invisible killers’ was first noted in a media article and is the moniker given to those individuals who will never be stand trial, due to their mental incapacity, for the homicide they are alleged to have committed (Fife-Yeomans & Bissett, 2008). Mouzos (2000) argues that despite media depictions, mentally ill people are no more likely to perpetrate a homicide than people not suffering from mental illness. In Archer’s (2008) research, the author found one case where a

woman had murdered her stepfather and two children. Archer (2008, p. 50) remarked that “[i]t is doubtful that these murders were added to the 1871 annual statistic returns, partly because the murdered stepfather was also the father to her two children and partly because she was committed insane when the truth finally came to light”.

Australian research, currently being undertaken by McKinley, Lark and Busch (in progress) identified 159 individuals found in publicly accessible articles since 1837. They have found that if a mentally impaired person is charged with murder, if their case is considered by the court their mental impairment will be taken into account during the trial and sentencing process. If the person is found not guilty by reason of mental impairment, they are usually detained in a secure mental health facility rather than being sentenced to prison. This detention is not punitive, but rather is intended to provide treatment and care to address their mental health needs.

Samuels et al. (2007) also discuss a range of other psychological and psychiatric defences to murder. While these defences may be appropriate and applicable to the perpetrator, as a result homicide statistics can be skewed, and families of victims are denied closure and may not feel that justice has been served. While there is some academic discussion of mental health and homicide, there is little discussion regarding the gap these verdicts create in reporting.

Missing persons

According to the Australian Federal Police (AFP), there are over 2,600 long term missing persons in Australia, which are defined as “someone who has been missing for more than three months” (Australian Federal Police, n.d.-a). However, tying long-term missing persons to potential homicides are complex and difficult. Ferguson and Pooley (2019, p. 384) remark that “there are no corresponding statistics to indicate how many of these 2,600 missing are likely to be deceased, let alone murdered; therefore, scoping the problem of the murdered missing poses some difficulties”. There are also approximately 750 sets of unidentified human remains located across Australia and identifying these remains and the individual’s cause of death could result in some being recognised as homicides (Australian Federal Police, 2022).

The abduction and suspected murders of four young women from Hunter region, New South Wales in the 1970s and 1990s are being investigated by two police strike forces. Strike Force Fenwick was established in 1998 to investigate the disappearance of these women and up to another 16 people from the greater Newcastle region over a 20-year period (Loomes, 2019). Then, 21 years later Strike Force Arapaima was established (April 2019) by Lake Macquarie detectives to re-

examine the investigations of the same missing and suspected murders (Partridge, 2019).

The victims include university student Leanne Goodall (20) who disappeared after leaving the Star Hotel in Newcastle in December of 1979.³ Robyn Hickie (18) who left her home around 7.15pm on Saturday 7 April 1979, and was last seen standing at a bus stop on the Pacific Highway at Belmont North. Also, Amanda Robinson (14) who just a fortnight later, on Saturday 21 April 1979, was last seen walking along Lake Road, Swansea, after attending a dance at her high school in Gateshead. Lastly, in 1994, Gordana Kotevski (16) was walking from a suburban shopping centre to her aunt's house when she was abducted at about 8.45pm in Charlestown. A subsequent Coronial Inquest, in 2002, into their combined disappearances found that the teenagers were deceased, most likely a result of foul play and that the cases "had fallen through the cracks" (Partridge, 2019). The cases were not properly looked at or reported to the coroner until detectives from Strike Force Fenwick took charge almost 20 years later.

James, Anderson and Putt (2008, p. xii) write that it is likely the number of persons reported as missing is higher than current data reflects; "[i]t is not possible to accurately estimate the number of unreported missing persons, although certain sub-groups in the population would seem more likely to be unreported". These include homeless people, people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds, Indigenous Australians and gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, gender questioning and same sex attracted people. Underreporting of missing persons contribute to a dark figure of missing persons, flowing into the dark figure of homicide. The oldest long-term missing person in the AFP database has been unaccounted for since 1945. If half of the 2,600 long-term missing persons were homicides, spreading those deaths out over the 76-year period since 1945 would result in an increase of 17 homicides per year, or an approximately 4% increase. This calculation, while crude, shows the potentially significant impact of these statistics on the national homicide rate.

In 2020, the AFP also launched the National DNA Program for Unidentified and Missing Persons, which works with families, police, coronial and forensic agencies to resolve long-term missing persons cases and match unidentified human remains with missing persons (Australian Federal Police, n.d.-b). In January 2021, NSW Police announced a new program aimed at matching missing persons with unidentified human remains (Parkes-Hupton, 2021). The program will collect DNA from biological relatives of long-term missing persons and compare it to the DNA of remains that have been found but are not yet identified (Parkes-Hupton, 2021). The program is voluntary and will depend on the cooperation of the

³ Ms Goodall's disappearance will not be reinvestigated by the newly established task force (Loomes, 2019).

biological families of missing persons (Parkes-Hupton, 2021). At the time of writing, 5 matches have been made as a result of this program, with one being made publicly available, and the program additionally having a role in identifying an unknown soldier from WWII (Australian Federal Police, 2022).

Quinet (2007) looks at missing persons in the United States through the lens of serial killers. She draws from a variety of sources and suggests that deaths from a variety of sources are not counted or misclassified – including missing persons, deaths in institutional care (prisons, hospitals or nursing homes), infant deaths, and runaway (or ‘throwaway’⁴) children, largely from the foster system (Quinet, 2007). McKinley and Jones (in press) found 139 Australian serial killers. Clearly there is considerable scope for unreported homicides currently masked as missing persons from a variety of sources to be added to the national homicide rate – “a small but significant number” – and there is almost nothing in the way of research to succinctly analyse this (Ferguson & Pooley, 2019, p. 8).

METHODOLOGY

Aim

This article aimed to contemporise Australian literature surrounding unreported homicides and highlight the complexities involved in the dark figure of homicide as well as identifying new possible categories for future research.

Category identification

Due to the very limited number of peer-reviewed papers available for the topics included in this article, specifically related to homicide, a mix of primary (peer-reviewed) and secondary sources (such as: grey literature and white papers) were consulted. Collection methods were categorised as digital and manual. The process of analysing included finding themes from extant literature and media reports. A thematic inductive content analysis was completed. Appropriate key words for each topic were determined and then run through various open-source and subscription databases. Alternatives and truncations for key words were utilised where applicable. Only English language resources were considered. Academic peer-reviewed sources were preferred; however, due to the lack of such sources for some subjects, media and grey literature have been important in analysing each subject. Australian literature was ideal but international examples have been applied where relevant. Articles were rejected if it was possible to determine from the title or abstract that they were not relevant to the subject.

⁴ Throwaway children can be defined as those who are abandoned or exiled by their parents or guardians

The next step included reading each sources abstract, introduction and conclusion and recording essential information, such as:

- Dates of research
- Discussions and the variety of solutions to one problem, etc.
- Names of researcher(s)
- Tools and methods previous studies have utilised to investigate the topic
- Uniqueness and popularity of a described theory

Once this was done, the research team reviewed all relevant works and drew conclusions, contrasted ideas, as well as introducing facts and evidence to create the argument.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In Australia, there is no federal coroner, and state/territory coroners began to exist from 1975 onwards (Mitchell, 2018). This could mean that reviewing deaths that occurred prior to 1975 is made more difficult due to the absence of technical expertise that a coroner carries. Given the relatively small rate of homicides in Australia, even the addition of a few events to the overall annual homicide numbers will be statistically significant. If there are two additional unreported homicides for each category discussed in this review added per year, that equates to a 3.8% increase in homicides based on 2019 statistics. It is arguable that more easily concealed deaths like elder abuse, infant deaths and human trafficking deaths are more likely to have additional unreported homicides than contact killers. This article has contemporised Australian literature and identified homicides considered more likely to escape the attention of authorities being 'contract killing', elder abuse, equivocal deaths, honour killings, human trafficking/people smuggling, infant deaths, 'invisible killers' and long-term missing persons. It highlighted the vulnerability of these victims.

LIMITATIONS

There are some elements of ABS data which must be considered. First, data is compiled from police systems based on victims. Data is also sorted by reported date, which does not necessarily correlate with the offence date. This can skew yearly totals, and this "is particularly the case for homicide and related offences and sexual assault, where in some instances there may be a large time difference between when the offence(s) occurred and the report/detection date" (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020c). If police determine that no crime has occurred after

180 days of an investigation, then the data is excluded by the ABS; however, there does not seem to be a link between the data and court outcomes or convictions (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020c). This has both positives and downfalls – linking data specifically to convictions could result in the exclusion of large and important data sets; however, without a court conviction then arguably there can be some doubt as to the nature of the offence, given it has never been established through the justice system – “[e]ven if death can be proved, it’s a difficult thing to prove that a person caused it” (Schwartz, 2019).

Further research into unreported homicide both domestically and internationally to better inform prevention and responses to the crime. The next areas of interest where unreported homicides may exist include:

- COVID-19
- Death in custody
- Death in institutions
- Hermits, hoarders or ‘shut-ins’
- Missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls
- Out of Home Care (OOHC) runaways or ‘throwaway’⁵ children
- Serial killers
- Sorcery and witchcraft⁶ (as opposed to Wicca), superstition, human sacrifice, and black magic
- “Snuff” films

What has become clear is there is a second type of unreported homicide – homicides that are not reported by the media (Smiley & Lavoipierre, 2018). These homicides are those which are under investigation or proceeding through the court system, but because of priorities, resources, other media foci, and details of the murder, media outlets have chosen not to publicly report on them and, thereby, inform the general public. While these homicides may appear in official statistics, a lack of coverage may deny family and friends information and closure on a case, particularly where loved ones are dispersed or unconnected and may not have direct communication with individuals involved in the case. This type of unreported homicide is not the primary focus of this research; however, it is worth noting for its ramifications on access to justice and closure and will be the topic of future research.

⁵ ‘Throwaway’ children are those who have families that are no longer interested in their care, and so throwaway children may not run away, but a disappearance may not be followed up by their families.

⁶ Witchcraft, traditionally, the exercise or invocation of alleged supernatural powers to control people or events, practices typically involving sorcery, magic and perform black magic.

Three key stakeholders in unreported homicides can be categorised as “the deceased, the bereaved, and wider society”, including the justice system, which all hold a claim to the proper identification and recording of homicides (Jones, 2018, p. 565). From a law enforcement point of view, it is crucial for police to know about homicide for several reasons. Firstly, it is their duty to protect and serve the public, and investigating homicides is a critical part of that responsibility. Homicide is a serious crime that can have devastating consequences for families and communities, and it is important that the police work to bring those responsible to justice. By investigating homicides, the police can help to ensure that perpetrators are held accountable for their actions and that justice is served for the victims and their families. Secondly, understanding and investigating homicide is important for preventing future incidents of violence. By identifying patterns and trends in homicide, the police can develop strategies to prevent similar incidents from occurring in the future.

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