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Barnes

## The use of firearms in intimate murder-suicide in Australia and New Zealand

*Jo Barnes*

### **Abstract**

Although murder-suicide is relatively rare, the number of events per year is fairly constant and often occurs in the context of intimate or family relations. These intimate or familial murder-suicides are, in most cases, perpetrated by males who kill their female partners and/or children and are often preceded by incidents of domestic violence. This paper proposes that murder-suicide can be positioned at the extreme end of a continuum of violence. Using data from Australia and New Zealand for a period of twenty years from 1973-1992, the article explores the use of firearms to show how domestic violence can culminate in tragic death.

### **Introduction**

Murder-suicide is an event that, although relatively rare, is nevertheless numerically fairly consistent each year and is perpetrated often by those who deliberately intend to murder and then commit suicide (Barnes, 1997). Research undertaken in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia shows that murder-suicide is a gendered activity with the majority of murder-suicide events being perpetrated by males who use firearms to kill their victims (e.g. Barnes, 1997; Dorpat, 1966; Wallace, 1986; West, 1965; Wolfgang, 1958). Most murder-suicides occur in the context of intimate or family relations and are often preceded by a history of domestic violence that culminates in the fatal use of a loaded firearm.

In this paper the thesis that murder-suicide can be placed on the extreme end of a continuum of domestic violence (Kelly, 1987) is proposed and data from Australia and New Zealand are used to illustrate how firearms can transform 'domestic violence' into murder.

### **Murder-suicide in Australia and New Zealand**

The murder-suicide event is one in which an offender kills one or more victims and then takes his or her own life. In an extensive study of murder-suicide in Australia (Barnes, 1997) data were collected using the records of state coroners in four states of Australia (South Australia, Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia). For a twenty year period (1973 -1992), 233 murder-suicide events were identified. Of these, detailed information was collected on 188 cases in which a total of 438 people died (of the 188 incidents 146 involved one offender and one victim, while the remaining 42 incidents involved one offender and multiple victims).

In New Zealand, for which no equivalent study was found, data extracted from the New Zealand Police's National Homicide Monitoring Programme show that over a six year period (1993-1998) 29 murder-suicides occurred in which a total of 63 people died.

In the study of murder followed by suicide undertaken in Australia (Barnes, 1997), three important features of the murder-suicide act stand out. One is the gendered profile of murder-suicide, the second is the relationship between the offender and the victim, and the third is the use of firearms to carry out the murder-suicide.

In Australia and New Zealand murder-suicide is most likely to be carried out by a male and the victim is most likely to be female. At the same time the relationship between offender and victim in the murder-suicide event is often an intimate one. While there are a small number of cases in which women are the offenders and their male partners the victims, in most cases victims of female-initiated murder-suicides are the offender's own children (Barnes, 1997, p. 114). There are also cases in which men kill their own children, sometimes as part of a plan to kill their whole family, but the only victims are the children. Other victims are family members or friends or are at least known to the offender. Murder-suicides in which strangers are involved are rare. Firearms (hand guns, rifles and shotguns) are the weapons that are used most in male-perpetrated murder-suicides.

A significant aspect of murder-suicide is the gendered nature of the act. In Australia 90% (n=188) and in New Zealand 86% (n=29) of

the offenders were male. Females accounted for 71 % (n=250) of the victims in Australia and 65% (n=34) of victims in New Zealand (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Number and percentage of offenders and victims by sex**

	Offenders		Victims	
	No.	%	No	%
Male	195	89.9	85	29.3
Female	22	10.1	199	70.3
Total	217	100.0	284	100.0

A second significant aspect is the intimate and familial nature of murder-suicide. Of the total 217 murder-suicides carried out in Australia and New Zealand for which there were data, 142 of the 283 (50%) victims were, or had been, in an intimate relationship with the offender (intimates are defined as present or past spouses, defactors and lovers). The second largest category was that of 'own child' in which there were 85 victims (30%).

For both the murder and the suicide, a firearm was the favoured weapon. In 62% of suicides and 64% of murders, a gun was used. Knives accounted for 12% of murders while suffocation, mainly by carbon monoxide gas was responsible for 9% of suicides and 11% of murders. In the Australian data there were forty cases in which multiple weapons were used: that is, a different weapon was used for the murder and the suicide.

For the Australian study it was possible to analyse type of weapon by gender. Guns were used in 125 (74%) cases in which male offenders committed suicide. Of female offenders three (17%) used a firearm, while five (28%) caused their own deaths by carbon monoxide poisoning. When looking at murder weapons the pattern was very similar with 73% victims of male offenders being killed

by firearms and 11% by knives. Thirty nine percent of victims of female offenders died from the effects of carbon monoxide poisoning or suffocation and 15% from gunshot wounds.

Many of the documented cases in the Australian study of murder-suicide involved guns that the offender possessed for what appeared to be no apparent reason. While some offenders used them for hunting rabbits, most of the weapons were stored in wardrobes and seemed to be regarded as a badge of masculinity. Those offenders who actively purchased or borrowed a gun to carry out the planned murder-suicide appeared to encounter few obstacles — they were able to construct stories, which were readily believed, as to the planned use of the gun (Barnes, 1997).

Most murder-suicides take place in a domestic setting. In the Australian study the majority (69%) of murder-suicides took place in the privacy of the offenders and/or victim's home. Forty three percent took place in the home where both the victim and the offender were living at the time. Fourteen percent took place in the victim's home, often following the victim's departure from the family home, and 10% took place at the offender's home. Often in these cases the victims had returned to collect their belongings from the family home or perhaps to discuss the break-up of the relationship. Two percent of murder-suicides took place in a situation where the victim was killed in her/his own home and the offender then returned home to commit suicide. In three percent of cases it was the victim's workplace that was the site of the murder-suicide. Again, in these cases the offenders had gone to the victims' place of work to talk about their relationship. Ten percent of murder-suicides took place in public places, such as in the street outside the victims' or offenders' homes, or remote sections of parks or bushland. In nine percent of murder-suicides, victims were killed in their own home and the offender had then travelled to such places as a railway line, bridge or river and committed suicide.

The pattern seems to be similar in New Zealand. The three year survey of gun homicide in New Zealand, 1992-1994, undertaken by Alpers and Morgan (1995) which looked at victims and perpetrators and their weapons found that: "All 13 victims of murder/suicide (100%) were shot by a family member, a former partner or a known

sexual rival .....Twelve (92%) of 13 victims of murder/suicide were shot at home or at work" (Alpers and Morgan, 1995, p. 4).

A third feature of the murder-suicide cases is the presence of violence prior to the event. Stories of physical, verbal and mental abuse were rife within the case studies. While it is obvious that not all violent relationships end in such a final way, nor is it true that all murder-suicides have a violent history behind them, a consideration of the part played by domestic violence is important in attempting to understand the background in which some murder-suicides occur.

In the Australian study there were 69 cases (37%) in which there was a known history of violence within the relationship. Often the victim had been physically or mentally abused by the offender for sometime prior to the event. It was virtually impossible to quantify the amount of violence and the duration over which it may have taken place but as the two following cases show violence was often a characteristic of the relationship between the offender and the victim. The information contained in these cases came from police records (Barnes, 1997):

**Case No. 139**

The 37 year old male of Polish descent killed his estranged wife and then himself after he had waited for her to return to her home. The victim had left the marriage approximately four months earlier with the help of police who had confiscated the offender's guns. During her marriage the victim had been constantly verbally abused as well as suffering some physical violence. The victim had stayed at a refuge until the offender had moved into his mother's house and then had returned to her home. Following a period of harassment both in person and by telephone the victim had taken out a restraining order against the offender. A few weeks later the offender was imprisoned for eight days for contravening that order. The offender had threatened to kill the victim and her children a number of times and had at least once threatened to kill her and himself. He was described as drinking heavily and was "highly strung and excitable". The victim was in fear of him, so much so, that when he was allowed access to his children he was ordered to collect them from her in front of the police station.

**Case No. 87**

In this case a 62 year old man had had "three prior convictions for assaults on (his wife) including one prior in 1958 for wounding with intent to murder when he apparently shot (the victim) in the leg" (Police Statement]. When the offender discovered his wife was planning to leave and stay with friends with the possibility of not returning he shot her and then himself.

In a study of domestic violence in New Zealand, Busch, Robertson and Lapsley (1992) relate the stories of two women, victims of domestic violence and then murder-suicide.

Peggy died four months after being granted final non-molestation and non-violence orders. She was shot at point blank range by her ex-husband, Brian. Brian then shot himself .... Statements from their children found in police files or cited by the refuge worker make it clear that Brian had been violent towards Peggy over a long period of time (Busch, Robertson and Lapsley, 1992, p.145).

Roslyn...was leaving a counselling appointment when she was shot dead by her husband, Peter, who had been waiting outside. Peter then shot himself.... Most of the abuse Roslyn experienced in her marriage seems to have been emotional. However, there was one occasion on which Peter knocked her unconscious, and he appears to have used physical violence on the children (Busch, Robertson and Lapsley, 1992, p. 49).

**A continuum of violence**

Rod (1980) made the connection between domestic violence and homicide in her paper on marital murder when she asserted that "spouse murders with a history of assault could be said to be the 'tip of the iceberg' of domestic violence" (Rod, 1980, p. 99). The connection between domestic violence and homicide was made even clearer by Radford (1992) who used, seemingly for the first time, the term 'femicide' which she defined as "the misogynous killing of women by men" (Rod, 1980, p. 3). Arguing that it is a form of sexual violence Radford placed it on a continuum of sexual violence. The concept of a continuum of sexual violence on which the many forms of violence can be placed with sexual harassment and wolf

whistles at one end and rape and wife beating at the other was developed by Kelly (1987). Radford placed femicide at the extreme end of this continuum of sexual violence. Sexual violence focuses on a man's desire for power, dominance and control. It was defined by Kelly (1987, p. 41) as: Any physical, visual, verbal or sexual act, experienced by a woman or a girl, at the time or later, as a threat, invasion, or assault, that has the effect of hurting or degrading her and/or takes away her ability to control intimate contact.

This author argues that intimate murder-suicide can also be seen as being at the extreme end of a continuum of sexual violence. Identifying sexual violence as a broader concept that connects the different expressions of male violence allows the placement of these different types into the context of the overall oppression of women in patriarchal society. Theoretically it provides a broader perspective of male violence against women rather than the narrow definitions which result in an event such as murder-suicide being treated as a discrete disconnected issue which is often viewed as a result of mental illness (Barnes, 1997).

### **The use of firearms in domestic homicide**

The connection between intimate murder-suicide, domestic violence and the use of firearms can be clearly seen in this study of murder followed by suicide, but this type of event is only one example of domestic homicide. In Australia the National Homicide Monitoring Programme has revealed that during the period July 1989 to June 1996, there were 2,024 homicide incidents. Of these, 543 (27%) involved intimate partners. As in murder-suicide, intimate homicides overwhelmingly involved male offenders and female victims (77%), and of these approximately 26% involved the use of a firearm. A study of firearm homicides in New Zealand shows that 29 homicides involving 40 victims took place in the years 1992-94. Twenty two (55%) of these victims were victims of family violence.

The extent of homicide as a result of domestic violence is made visible by the availability of official data but the extent to which firearms are present within the domestic violence context is largely concealed. The study of family violence and breaches of domestic

protection orders by Busch et al. (1992), maintained that incidents such as the following example are rarely reported to the police:

One woman reported regular use of a firearm to intimidate. The first occasion followed an argument that saw her spending the night in another bedroom. In the morning, while she was in the bath, her partner brought a rifle into the bathroom and told her that if she left him, she would not get out of the area alive. A frequent terrorising tactic was to discharge the rifle by the bedroom window while she was asleep. She commented that he seemed pleased to see the fear this evoked as she awoke startled (Busch et al., 1992, p. 103).

Considerable controversy surrounds the effort to control firearms in Australia and New Zealand. Laws that attempt to restrict the availability of firearms are subject to heated debate between the anti-and pro-gun lobbies. A review of the literature on gun control indicates that one of the debates is based around the use of firearms in criminal activity and the use of firearms by the mentally ill (see for example, Alpers and Morgan, 1995). It is this author's opinion that focussing on criminals and the mentally ill as the perpetrators of illegal firearm use distracts the argument from the domestic nature of many gun related homicides.

The fact remains that a gun is an extremely effective means of fatal violence. The use of a gun to threaten can too easily result in death. An American report adroitly summarises the situation regarding firearms, "Any firearm murder follows a particular chain of events: One person acquires a firearm; two or more people come within reach of the firearm; a dispute escalates into an attack, the weapon is fired; it causes an injury; and *the injury is serious enough to cause death*" (Roth, 1994, p. 2, emphasis added).

### **Conclusion**

This paper has summarised the findings of an Australian study of murder-suicide, supplemented by data from the New Zealand National Homicide Monitoring Programme. The data showed murder followed by suicide is predominantly carried out by a male offender who kills his female victim with whom he has had an



intimate but often violent relationship. Using the concept of a continuum of violence the author proposed that intimate murder-suicide can be placed at the extreme end of that continuum and that firearms, which constitute the main weapon used in murder-suicides, can too easily transform violence into death.

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