



## Research Brief *Parricide*

### Introduction

The death of the Adelaide Crows' football coach at the hands of his son in July 2015 brought substantial media attention to family violence. In July 2016, when a father received fatal injuries after a one-punch attack by his son in the middle of the Brisbane CBD, parricide as a form of family violence was again a point of media attention. There is high public interest in such cases – not only do such incidents include homicide, but they contravene societal norms of honouring one's parents (Baxter, Duggan, Larkin, Cordess, & Page, 2001). Parricide, or a child killing their parent(s), includes either the killing of the perpetrator's father (patricide) or mother (matricide) (Heide, 2013). Parricide accounts for approximately four percent of homicides in Australia annually (Zander, 2015)

### Characteristics of Parricide

Although the occurrence of parricide garners substantial media and public attention, it is relatively rare. Many of the children who perpetrate parricide are over 18 years of age, and therefore legally adults (Heide, 2013). Many live in the same house as the victim (Dantas, Santos, Dias, Dinis-Oliveira, & Magalhães, 2014). Statistically, the most common parricide offences in Australia involve patricide by adult sons, while matricide by sons is less frequent. Female perpetration is also less common in Australia compared to other Western countries (Zander, 2015). In many cases of parricide, the incident occurs in the victim's home and is often spontaneous rather than premeditated – often the incident is either the result of untreated mental illness, or an attempt to stop ongoing family violence against the child, their siblings or the child's mother (Dantas et al., 2014; Heide, 2013; Zander, 2015).

Parricides committed by juveniles and adults have distinct characteristics (Cooke, 2001). Juveniles are more likely to commit impulsive acts of retaliation against abuse, while the actions of adults are more likely to be a result of mental illness (Baxter et al., 2001). There is a high correlation between schizophrenia and parricide (West & Feldsher, 2010). There is some debate in the literature as to whether parricide offenders are more likely than others to remain at the scene after the incident, with studies reporting conflicting results (Dantas et al., 2014; Weisman & Sharma, 1997).

### Research in Australia

In Australia, National Homicide Monitoring Report data shows that between 2002-3 and 2011-12, there were 128 parricide incidents (Cussen & Bryant, 2015). These incidents involved 134 victims (constituting 12 percent of all domestic violence victims) and 132 offenders (Cussen & Bryant, 2015). 88 percent of these incidents occurred in the victim's home, with 36 percent occurring between the hours of 6pm to midnight (Cussen & Bryant, 2015).

While the prevalence of parricide incidents is known, little is understood about the context and antecedents of these homicides. State and federal governments are increasingly

focused on addressing issues of family violence, but focus primarily on intimate partner violence, as this is the most prevalent form of family violence. Recent reports such as the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence, Queensland's Not Now, Not Ever report, and a 2016 COAG Advisory Panel Report into Violence against Women and their Children do not make reference to parricide as a form of family violence.

### International Evidence

Studies highlight that the act of parricide is "one of the least understood and most under-researched acts of family violence" (Walsh, Krienert, & Crowder, 2008, p. 1). Research into parricide primarily examines descriptive characteristics of the perpetrators and victims (as explained above). There are few studies that consider data beyond these demographics; due to the low frequency of these events, empirical research often has problems with small sample sizes, non-representative populations, and a lack of comparison groups (Baxter et al., 2001). The majority of studies are quantitative in nature. While such studies provide a wide overview of the statistics surrounding parricide incidents, they do not reveal important nuances in the context surrounding a parricide event.

Studies from the United States show that parricide is primarily an intraracial White crime, with African Americans significantly underrepresented in the statistics (Walsh et al., 2008). Patterns of offenders' demographic information are otherwise similar to those noted in Australia, with the most frequent offences involving male perpetrators and male victims in both the US and UK (Baxter et al., 2001; Cooke, 2001).

### Further Research

Further research is required to address the gaps in our understanding of parricide offences in Australia. While the Australian Institute of Criminology's National Homicide Monitoring Program ([http://www.aic.gov.au/about\\_aic/research\\_programs/nmp/0001.html](http://www.aic.gov.au/about_aic/research_programs/nmp/0001.html)) provides data on the demographic characteristics of the perpetrator and the victim, and classifies their relationship into several categories, little is understood about the broader context within which parricide offences occur. In particular, there is a need for qualitative data to capture the nuances of how parricide may differ from other types of family violence.

### References

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