

The People Most Likely to Kill with a Gun

Mental Health Commission Fact Sheet

A) In Overall Gun Homicide

Studies in Australia, New Zealand and Canada show the following characteristics to be the most reliable prior indicators of firearm-related homicide, listed in order of importance:

- 1) Availability of a gun (essential)
- 2) Maleness (90-97% of gun homicide victims are shot by men)
- 3) Familiarity (89-95% of gun homicide victims are shot by a person well known to them)
- 4) Domestic discord (55% of gun homicide victims are shot during family violence)
- 5) Legal gun ownership (52% of gun homicide victims are shot by a licensed gun owner)
- 6) Alcohol impairment (international studies suggest a range of 30-65%)
- 7) History of violent crime (8-13% are shot by a killer with a previous record of violent crime)
- 8) History of mental illness (4-12% are shot by a killer with a previous history of mental illness)

A typical gun homicide is committed by a licensed male gun owner with no record of violent crime or mental illness, using a legal firearm to kill someone he knows well. Australian, Canadian and New Zealand studies show alcohol is four times more likely to be a precipitating factor in homicide than mental illness. The proportion of gun killers diagnosed as mentally ill is smaller than the proportion of Australians and New Zealanders who suffer from mental illness at any given time.

B) In Mass Gun Killings

Mass shootings (five or more victims dead) are more widely publicised, yet they account for only one in 10 gun homicides. While 24 victims of mass shootings were killed by men with a previous history of mental illness, 65 were shot by previously law-abiding, licensed gun owners using legally held guns.

In the past 11 years, 15 mass shootings in Australia and New Zealand left 130 dead and 60 wounded by gunfire. All 16 killers were men. Police files, judges' summations and coroners' reports show that:

- 87% of the victims were shot by a killer with no previous history of violent crime
- 80% of the victims were shot by a killer with no previous history of mental illness
- 61% of the victims died in a shooting where a military-style semi-automatic weapon was used
- 53% of the victims were shot by a licensed gun owner

Aiming to Misdemeanor: Linking Gun Killings to Mental Illness

Though a small proportion of gun killers do have a previous history of mental illness, its significance is sometimes exaggerated to divert attention from more common factors. The easy availability of a gun, domestic discord, licensed firearm ownership and alcohol impairment are much more reliable predictors of gun violence. Measures designed to reduce firearm injury should take these into account.

Sources: Graycar, A. *AIC Fact Sheet*. Australian Institute of Criminology, 5 Dec 1996; Alpers, P & Morgan, B. *Firearm Homicide in New Zealand, 1992-94*. NZ Public Health Association conference, Jun 1995; James, J & Hallinan, J. *Homicides in Australia, 1992-93*. Australian Institute of Criminology, Dec 1995; Conly, D. *Domestic Homicides Involving the Use of Firearms*. Department of Justice, Canada, Mar 1992; Miller, I. *Murder in New Zealand 1988-93*. NZ Police HQ, Aug 1994; Alpers, P. *Eleven Years of Mass Gun Killings in Australia and New Zealand, 1987-1997* (summary overleaf)

Eleven Years of Mass Gun Killings in Australia and New Zealand, 1987-97

June 1997

Date	Location	T	F	G	V	P	S	K	W	Name	A	C	M	L
08/02/97	Raurimu, NZ	M	Y	S	6	0	6	6	5	Stephen Anderson	24	U	Y	N
28/04/96	Port Arthur, TAS	M	N	M	35	0	35	35	19	Martin Bryant	28	N	N	N
25/01/96	Hillcrest, QLD	MS	Y	R	6	1	7	7	0	Peter May	32	N	N	Y
20/06/94	Dunedin, NZ	M	Y	R	5	0	5	5	0	David Bain	22	N	N	Y
31/03/93	Cangai, NSW	MS	N	R	5	1	6	6	0	Leabeater/Steele*	41	N	Y	N
27/10/92	Terrigal, NSW	M	Y	S	6	0	6	6	1	Malcolm Baker	45	N	N	Y
20/05/92	Paerata, NZ	MS	Y	S	4	1	5	7	0	Brian Schlaepfer	64	N	N	Y
17/08/91	Strathfield, NSW	MS	N	M	6	1	7	8	7	Wade Frankum	33	N	N	Y
13/11/90	Aramoana, NZ	MS	N	M	13	1	14	14	3	David Gray	33	N	N	Y
30/08/90	Surry Hills, NSW	M	Y	S	5	0	5	5	0	Paul Evers	35	Y	Y	Y
25/09/88	Oenpelli, NT	M	Y	S	6	0	6	6	0	Dennis Rostron	25	N	N	N
08/12/87	Queen St, VIC	MS	N	M	8	1	9	9	5	Frank Vitkovic	22	N	Y	Y
10/10/87	Canley Vale, NSW	MS	N	R	5	1	6	6	1	John Tran	23	N	N	Y
09/08/87	Hoddle St, VIC	M	N	M	7	0	7	7	19	Julian Knight	19	N	N	Y
19/06/87	Top End, NT/WA	M	N	M	5	1	6	6	0	Josef Schwab	26	Y	N	N
Totals					122	8	130	133	60					

T Homicide Type: M = Murder MS = Murder/Suicide
F Homicide occurred during family violence
G Gun used (primary weapon): R = Rifle S = Shotgun M = Military-style semi-automatic weapon
V Victims shot dead
P Perpetrators shot dead
S Total shot dead
K Total killed by any means (3 additional victims were knifed)
W Victims wounded
A Age of perpetrator
C Perpetrator had a previous conviction for violent crime: Yes/No/Unknown
M Perpetrator had a previous history of mental illness:** Yes/No/Unknown
L Perpetrator was a licensed gun owner: Yes/No/Unknown

* These homicides were committed by two perpetrators, Leabeater and Steele. The histories of both men are included.

** A history of mental illness is defined as a detectable DSM IV psychiatric illness either diagnosed, reported to authorities or even seriously suspected by others prior to the shooting – i.e. minimum sufficient cause to justify legal seizure of firearms.

Port Arthur Killer “Not Mentally Ill”

Early headlines labelled Martin Bryant as a schizophrenic, but this was untrue. All seven doctors and psychiatrists whose reports were considered at his trial – including the forensic psychiatrists who examined Bryant in jail – agreed that he had a low IQ but no mental illness. At sentencing, Judge Cox put it on record that Bryant was “not suffering from a mental illness.” Several other mass gun killers have been judged mentally ill only in hindsight.

Aramoana killer David Gray also had no criminal or mental history. It’s often claimed that Gray had intimidated a bookshop assistant with a \$10 airgun ten months before the shootings. Yet the shop owner withdrew that complaint after agreeing that “at no time was the air rifle used to threaten any person.” After the shootings, Police Complaints Authority Sir Peter Quilliam also found that Gray “had never committed any offence and the police have been unable to find anyone who thought him capable of any violent action ... (he) had done nothing to draw attention to the possibility that his licence should be revoked.” Aramoana residents had never seen Gray with a gun. Although one psychiatrist, who had never met him, later said that he “probably was” suffering from some symptoms of psychiatric disorder at the time, Gray had never in his life been diagnosed, recorded or reported as mentally ill.

The oddest recent behaviour witnesses could remember at the trial of David Bain was that he “nodded off” at a concert a few days before he shot his family of five. Brian Schlaepfer was treated for mild depression before he killed his family of six. This is insufficient evidence for police to search private property and to seize guns.

Targeting people with mental illness may be a popular notion, but it promises to be one of the least effective.

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