

# Why do parents kill their children? The facts about filicide in Australia

February 8 2019, by Terry Goldsworthy

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

A [six-month-old baby was killed](#) earlier this week in what is suspected to be a murder-suicide. Police [are investigating](#) whether the child was killed by its father, after their bodies were found in a car on the Sunshine Coast.

At least one child in Australia is killed by a parent each fortnight, according to a report into [filicide](#) released by the [Australian Institute of Criminology](#) this week. Filicide is a general term referring to the killing of a child by a parent or parent equivalent – [which in Australia includes](#) the custodial parent, non-custodial parents and step-parents.

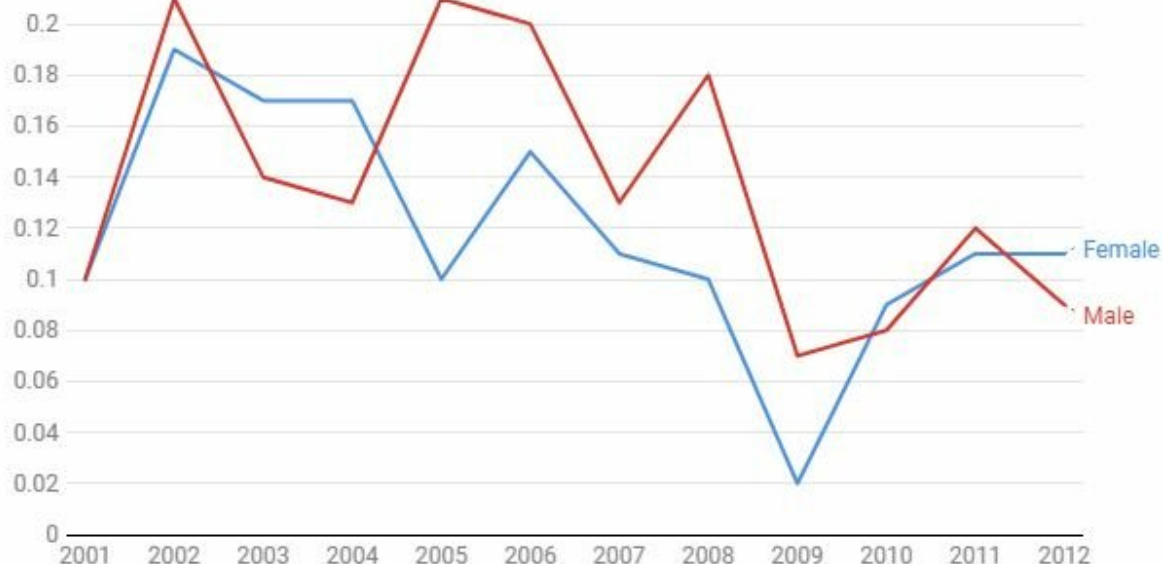
The report shows that between 2000-01 and 2011-12 there were 238 recorded incidents of filicide in Australia, with 260 offenders involved in these incidents. Males constituted 52 percent (124) of offenders and females 48 percent (114).

As the graph below shows, the rate of filicide offending for males has decreased in Australia in recent years, while the rate for females has increased.

Filicide [accounts for about 10 percent](#) of all homicides (murders) in Australia. By comparison, a [2014 US study](#) that looked at around 94,000 cases of filicide found it accounted for 15 percent of murders over that period.

Between 2002-03 and 2011-12, children accounted for 21 percent of domestic homicide victims, the second most frequent group after intimate partners. The AIC study showed 96 percent of filicide victims were aged 0-17 years.

### Rate (per 100,000) of filicide offenders by gender in Australia 2001-2012



Credit: The Conversation

### The role of gender in filicides

Filicide is one sub-classification of domestic homicides. The others being intimate partner, parricide (killing of a parent) and siblicide (killing of a sibling). Filicide differs from the other sub-classifications in the nature of the gender of offenders.

Where the other sub-classifications are generally committed in higher levels by males, the gender of the offenders is equally distributed in filicide. A [2015 AIC report into domestic homicide](#) identified that between 2002-03 and 2011-12 males committed 77 percent of intimate partner homicides, 80 percent of parricides and 89 percent of siblicides.

This gender-neutral trend follows the pattern of other child abuse behaviours. A 2018 [study into child maltreatment](#) found that females accounted for just over half of those responsible for maltreatment.

However, within this, females were more likely to be responsible for neglect, whereas male offenders were responsible for physical, emotional and sexual abuse. In terms of filicide, the recent report found the [method of killing](#) varied between genders, with males more likely to use more violent methods.

### Domestic homicides in Australia 2008-2014



Credit: The Conversation

### Why do they do it?

We often see filicide as an act of an evil person. I spent many years examining the concept of evil and concluded that usually an evil act can be committed by a rather ordinary person.

Generally I found one or more of three emotive elements was necessary in the act to allow us to call it evil. These are: the perceived senselessness of the act, the perceived innocence of the victim and the uniqueness of

the act. Filicide contains all three.

It is useful to try to understand why people may commit filicide. Seeking understanding is not the same as condoning, nor may the reasons appear rational. In a 2016 article, [psychiatry professor Phillip Resnick](#) identified five major motivations for filicide, as set out in the table below.

We could, perhaps, put one of the [worst cases of filicide in Australia](#) into the first category. In 2014, Raina Mersane Ina Thaiday stabbed to death seven of her biological children and a niece. She was eventually found unfit for trial due to suffering a psychotic episode triggered by undiagnosed schizophrenia at the time of the murders.

### Motivations for filicide

Motivations for filicide	
Acutely psychotic filicide	Can be applied to psychotic parents who kill with no comprehensible motive.
Child maltreatment filicide	Usually involves battered child syndrome (where the child is injured through physical abuse). This is the only one of the five categories where the child's death may be unintended.
Altruistic filicide	The act is committed out of love, usually to help the child avoid perceived suffering.
Unwanted child filicide	The child is no longer wanted and the act is undertaken to achieve this. It can often apply to the killing of newborns.
Spousal revenge filicide	The motivation and action of the offender is a deliberate attempt to make their spouse suffer.

## What are the triggers for filicide

All the studies mentioned in this article have highlighted notable rates of mental health issues among those who commit filicide. A [2013 study from the UK](#), which examined filicides in England and Wales between 1997 and 2006, found that [40 percent of filicide offenders had a recorded mental illness](#). Young age in the [offender](#) was also a factor.

Other risk factors include acrimonious relationship breakdowns and post-separation parenting disputes. Alcohol, drug use, previous offending, a history of domestic violence and suicidal tendencies all increase the [risk of offending](#).

Preventing filicide is difficult as the cause of the offence and relationships between the offender and victim vary. In terms of basic responses, [enhanced case management and co-operation and communication between agencies](#) have been suggested as starting blocks to identify and prevent potential filicide.

Ultimately, children are the most vulnerable of victims, and as a society we have a duty to ensure we do all in our power to protect them.

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