Partner Killing by Men in Cohabiting and Marital Relationships

A Comparative, Cross-National Analysis of Data From Australia and the United States

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Using a national-level U.S. database, T. K. Shackelford (2001) calculated rates of uxoricide (the murder of a woman by her romantic partner) by relationship type (cohabiting or marital), by ages of the partners, and by the age difference between partners. Women in cohabiting relationships were 9 times more likely to be killed by their partner than were married women. Within marriages, the risk of uxoricide decreases with a woman's age. Within cohabiting relationships, middle-aged women were at greatest risk of uxoricide. The risk of uxoricide increased with greater age difference between partners. We sought to replicate the findings of Shackelford (2001) using a national-level database that includes information on more than 4,400 homicides that occurred in Australia between 1989 and 2002. Despite the higher rate of partner killing in the United States, and despite other cultural differences between the two countries, we replicated key patterns with the Australian data.

Keywords: *intimate partner homicide; cohabitation; marriage; Australia; United States*

Much research has examined homicide in intimate relationships (e.g., Block & Christakos, 1995; Browne, 1997; Browne & Williams, 1993; Campbell et al., 2003; Carcach & James, 1998; Daly & Wilson, 1988; Ewing, 1997;

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JOURNAL OF INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE, Vol. 20 No. 10, October 2005 1310-1324
DOI: 10.1177/0886260505278606

Johnson & Hotton, 2003; Moracco, Runyan, & Butts, 1998; Mouzos, 1999, 2001b; Shackelford, Buss, & Peters, 2000). Although some of the findings of this research can be used to guide efforts to prevent intimate partner homicide, further research is needed to identify other variables, such as marital status and age, that might increase the risk of intimate partner homicide. An additional avenue for identifying the key predictors of intimate partner homicide is provided by cross-national comparisons of victimization patterns (e.g., Mouzos & Shackelford, 2004), the key focus of the current research and article, as discussed further below.

Research has identified differences in the risk of homicide victimization based on the type of relationship between two people who reside together. This research addresses differences in risk for persons in cohabiting relationships versus marital relationships. We use the term *cohabiting relationship* because it is the least restrictive label that encapsulates the various terms used to describe two persons involved intimately and who reside together but are not legally married (see Shackelford, 2001).

Women in cohabiting relationships, in particular, have been found to be at greater risk for lethal and nonlethal intimate partner violence than are women in marital and dating relationships (Crawford, Gartner, & Dawson, 1997; Daly & Wilson, 1988; Shackelford, 2001; Stets & Straus, 1989). For example, research using Canadian homicide data finds that, first, women in cohabiting relationships, compared to women in marital relationships, incur higher rates of homicide victimization by a male partner, and that, second, there are age differences associated with this risk. Using national-level Canadian homicide data, Wilson, Daly, and Wright (1993) and Wilson, Johnson, and Daly (1995) reported that women in cohabiting relationships are 9 times more likely to be killed by a partner than are married women. Furthermore, Wilson and colleagues (Wilson et al., 1993; Wilson et al., 1995) reported that, within marital relationships, women in their early 20s are at greatest risk of uxoricide, or being killed by a partner. Within cohabiting relationships, in contrast, women who are middle aged, in their mid-30s and 40s, are at greatest risk of uxoricide. Finally, women in marital relationships and cohabiting relationships are at greatest risk of uxoricide when they are partnered to men who are either much older or much younger than they are.

Shackelford (2001) set forth to replicate the Canadian findings reported by Wilson and colleagues (Wilson et al., 1993; Wilson et al., 1995) using national-level U.S. homicide data. Shackelford (2001) replicated many of the key findings reported in the Canadian studies, including the finding that women in cohabiting relationships incur a higher risk of uxoricide than do married women. Apart from the research in Canada and the United States, however, no other research has examined using national-level data the risk of

partner killing by men by type of relationship. Being able to identify risks associated with type of relationship and age can help to pinpoint the characteristics of persons most at risk of homicide victimization and offending. This is especially pertinent when examining women as victims of homicide because a large percentage of these victims are killed by an intimate partner (see, e.g., Daly & Wilson, 1988). Unfortunately, there has been a lack of comparative, cross-national research in this area.

Cross-national research has been fruitful, with hundreds of comparative studies conducted, but few in the area of homicide and specifically intimate partner homicide (see Shackelford, 2001). Many of these studies present intra-U.S. comparisons, not comparisons across cultures or nations. The potential value of comparative studies lies in the possibility of identifying common and unique features of crime, especially lethal violence, in different countries. Comparative studies also can be of value to public policy because they can provide a novel perspective on a nation's crime problem (e.g., rates and patterns) and the ways in which similar problems are experienced and dealt with in different nations. Through the identification of common patterns between nations, cross-national research also might facilitate the extrapolation of prevention policies between similar nations.

Recognizing the potential utility of comparative, cross-national research, Mouzos and Shackelford (2004) conducted comparative research in the United States and Australia, with the aim of replicating using an Australian sample patterns found in the United States in relation to women killing intimate partners. The findings revealed that, although the incidence of partner killing by women is higher in the United States, the two countries display similar patterns of partner killing by women, including a greater risk to cohabiting men than to married men of being killed by a partner (see Mouzos & Shackelford, 2004, for details).

Given the availability of national-level homicide data and population estimates for Australia and the United States, and the previous encouraging results regarding comparative research between the two countries, we sought to replicate, using an Australian database, the risk patterns identified by Shackelford (2001) for partner killing by men in cohabiting and marital relationships in the United States. We also considered age to be an important variable for relative risk of uxoricide by type of relationship, given that this risk varies with the age of the victim and the age of the offender (see, e.g., Mouzos, 2001a; Wolfgang, 1958). Identifying which age group of cohabiting women and married women are at greatest risk of being killed by a partner also may assist in understanding the reasons behind the elevated risks.

The current study is important also because the replication of findings using Australian data would increase the robustness of the findings from pre-

vious research that has examined the risk of partner killing by men as a function of type of relationship and ages of the partners. Such cross-national replications would be particularly impressive given some of the differences in homicide trends and patterns between the United States and Australia. During 2001, for example, the United States homicide rate of 5.6 per 100,000 persons was almost 3.5 times the rate for Australia (rate of 1.9; Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2001, and Mouzos, 2003, respectively). About 14% of homicides in Australia are committed with a firearm (Mouzos, 2003), compared to 66% in the United States (FBI, 2001). As a final example of differences in homicide patterns between the two countries, a greater proportion of homicides occur between intimate partners in Australia (23%, Mouzos, 2003) when compared to the United States (10%, FBI, 2001).

Despite higher rates of homicide in the United States, several patterns of homicide victimization and offending are similar between the two countries. In both countries, for example, most homicides occur in a residential dwelling between persons who know one another, and during the late evening or early hours of the morning. In both countries, most homicides occur between persons who are not in paid employment at the time of the incident. In addition, men overwhelmingly outnumber women as victims and offenders in the United States and Australia (data for United States from FBI, 2001; data for Australia from Mouzos, 2003).

METHOD

National Homicide Data

Australia. The national-level data for homicide in Australia is derived from the National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP) held at the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC). The NHMP collects details on all homicides that come to the attention of police across Australia's eight states and territories. The NHMP database includes the details of all homicides (victims and offenders) for the fiscal years 1989-1990 to 2001-2002, providing information on 4,421 homicide victims and 4,501 homicide offenders. Each homicide record includes information about the circumstances of the incident, victim and offender demographics, and the victim-offender relationship. Homicide rates were calculated for married women and cohabiting women according to population estimates provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Family Characteristics Survey, 1997 (ABS, 2002). Mouzos (1999, 2001a, 2001b, 2003) provided additional and detailed information about the NHMP database.

United States. Data for the United States were derived from the published findings of Shackelford (2001). Shackelford (2001) used the FBI's Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHRs) for the years 1976 to 1994 (Fox, 1996), which provides information on 429,729 homicides. SHRs include incident-level data on every reported homicide, including the relationship of the victim to the offender and the ages of the victim and offender. Shackelford (2001) calculated homicide rates for married women and for cohabiting women according to population estimates provided by the U.S. Census Bureau. For married women, rates were calculated using weighted averages of the 1980 and 1990 census data; for cohabiting women, rates were calculated using weighted averages of the 1980 and 1990 Current Population Survey for unmarried coresident couples (see Shackelford, 2001, for details).

Calculation of Homicide Rates

In this section, we provide examples of how we calculated homicide rates. To calculate the intimate partner homicide victimization rate per million married couples per annum for a woman younger than age 25 years who was killed by a man younger than age 25 years, we first calculated how many married women younger than age 25 years were killed by a man younger than age 25 years per annum (the numerator). This figure was then divided by the number of couples in the general population (population estimates) who were younger than age 25 years (the denominator). The resulting figure was then multiplied by one million to obtain the rate.

A similar method was used to calculate homicide rates for cohabiting women, with population estimates for cohabiting couples used instead. Where rates are presented as a function of the man's age or the woman's age (Figures 1 and 2), the population estimates have been halved to represent single members of couples. For example, to calculate the per annum rate of partner killings by men per million married women younger than age 25 years, we first calculated how many married women younger than age 25 years were killed per annum (the numerator). This figure was then divided by the number of married women younger than age 25 years in the population (the denominator). The resulting figure was then multiplied by one million to obtain the rate.

Procedures

Statistics for the United States (based on Shackelford, 2001) are presented in this section in parentheses following figures for Australia. Of the more than 4,400 homicides included in the NHMP database (more than 400,000

cases in the United States), there were 233 homicides (13,670 in the United States) in which a man killed the woman to whom he was legally married, and 223 homicides (2,000 in the United States) in which a man killed the woman with whom he was cohabiting but to whom he was not married. Homicides involving ex-spouses and noncohabiting ex-partners were excluded from the Australian and U.S. data for reportorial and conceptual efficiency and to retain consistency with Shackelford (2001) and with Mouzos and Shackelford (2004).

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the ages of married and cohabiting victims and perpetrators in Australia and the United States. Victims and perpetrators who were married tended to be older than their cohabiting counterparts. Regardless of relationship type, the perpetrators tended to be younger than their victims.

RESULTS

We present results for analyses of Australian data first, followed by the parallel results for the U.S. data. This presentation strategy allows for a straightforward cross-national comparison of results, including the identification of similarities and differences. The examination of differential risk patterns for married and cohabiting women is divided into three sections. The first section examines uxoricide risk for married women and for cohabiting women in Australia and in the United States. The second section examines uxoricide risk for married women and for cohabiting women as a function of the man's age and the woman's age in Australia and in the United States. The last section examines uxoricide for women in the two types of relationships as a function of the age difference between the partners in Australia and the United States.

In Australia, married women were killed by their partners at a rate of 4.7 women per million married women per annum, whereas cohabiting women were killed at a much higher rate of 44.9 women per million cohabiting women per annum. This pattern in which cohabiting women incur a higher uxoricide risk than do married women replicates the findings of Shackelford (2001) for the United States. Shackelford (2001) reported that cohabiting women in the United States incurred more than 8 times the uxoricide risk than did married women.

Figure 1 provides a graphical presentation of uxoricide risk for married women (clear bars) and for cohabiting women (dark bars) as a function of the woman's age in Australia and in the United States. Whether an intimate partner homicide occurs in Australia or the United States, the comparative analy-

TABLE 1: Descriptive Statistics of Study Populations

	Australia			*United States*		
Descriptive Statistics	*Mean Age*	SD	*Age Range*	*Mean Age*	SD	*Age Range*
Married victims	44.6	16.7	18 to 88	39.4	15.4	15 to 95
Married perpetrators	48.1	16.3	18 to 88	43.3	15.7	16 to 98
Cohabiting victims	31.6	10.4	16 to 67	34.1	11.4	14 to 81
Cohabiting perpetrators	33.9	10.5	17 to 69	38.2	12.1	15 to 85

ses indicate that, among married women, the uxoricide risk is greatest for the youngest women. In Australia, married women younger than age 25 years incur about 2½ times the uxoricide risk of women in the age 25 to 34 year group, and about 3 times the uxoricide risk of women in the age 35 to 44 year group. In the United States, married women who are younger than age 25 years incur about 2 times the uxoricide risk of women in the age 25 to 34 year group, and about 3 times the uxoricide risk of women in the age 35 to 44 year group.

Although the age-risk pattern for married women is similar in Australia and the United States, the picture changes somewhat for cohabiting women. In Australia, cohabiting women younger than age 25 years incur the greatest uxoricide risk, followed by women between age 35 and 44 years. Cohabiting women in the age 65 and older group incur the lowest uxoricide risk. Among cohabiting women in the United States, women who are middle aged, in the age 35-44 year group, incur the greatest uxoricide risk. Women in this age group incur about 2 times the risk of women in the youngest age group, and about 4 times the risk of women in the oldest age group (older than age 64 years).

Figure 2 presents partner-killing perpetration rates for married men (clear bars) and for cohabiting men (dark bars) in Australia and in the United States. The risk pattern for married men killing a partner in Australia replicates the results presented by Shackelford (2001) for the United States. The risk of killing a partner in Australia and in the United States is highest for married men in the youngest age group (younger than age 25 years) and generally decreases with the man's age. For cohabiting men, in contrast, the age-risk pattern is somewhat different between Australia and the United States. In Australia, the risk of partner killing by men is highest for cohabiting men in the youngest age group (younger than age 25 years), whereas in the United States the risk of partner killing by men is highest for men in the age 45 to 64 year group.

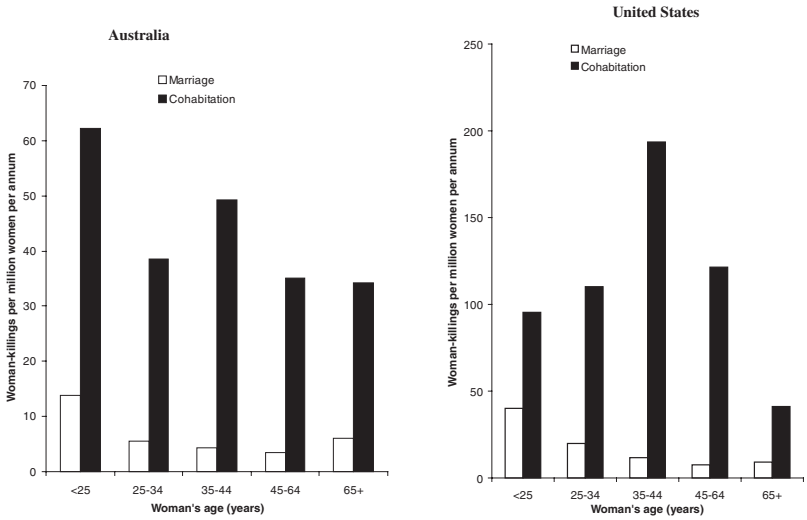

Figure 1: Partner Killings by Men per Million Women per Annum as a Function of Relationship Type and Man's Age

SOURCE: Australian Institute of Criminology, n.d.; Shackelford, 2001.

Table 2 (Australia) and Table 3 (United States) present the rates of uxoricide per million married couples per annum and per million cohabiting couples per annum (in parentheses) as a function of the ages of the partners. Overall, the uxoricide risk is greater for cohabiting women than for married women, for Australia and the United States. In Australia and the United States, younger women married to older men appear to be most at risk of being killed by a partner. It should be noted, however, that this finding for Australia may be a result of the large standard error associated with Australian population figures for married and cohabiting couples in the oldest age group. The age-risk pattern for cohabiting women in Australia follows that observed in the United States by Shackelford (2001). Cohabiting women in the age 25 to 34 year group incur one of the highest uxoricide risks when partnered to older men (age 45 years and older). The highest uxoricide risk for cohabiting women in Australia is incurred by women between age 35 to 44 years and who are partnered to men younger than age 25 years. In contrast, the highest uxoricide risk for cohabiting women in the United States is incurred by women between age 35 to 44 years who are partnered to men age 65 years or older.

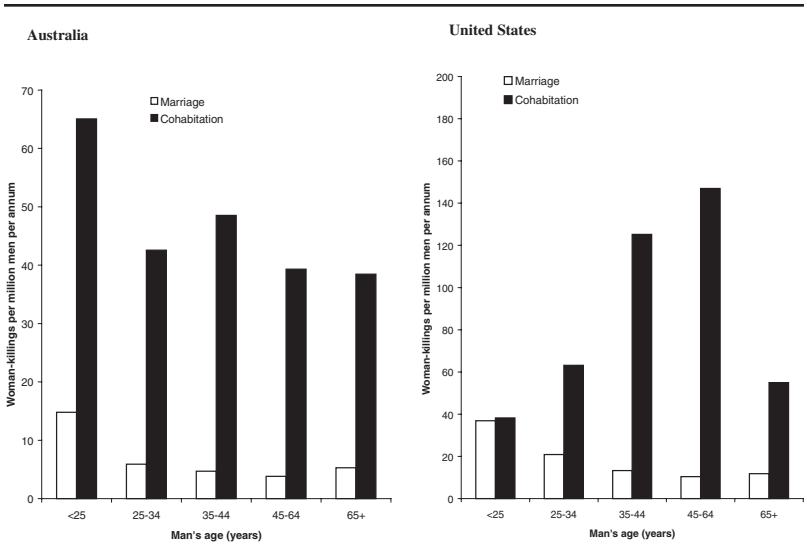

Figure 2: Partner Killings by Men per Million Men per Annum as a Function of Relationship Type and Woman's Age

SOURCE: Australian Institute of Criminology, n.d.; Shackelford, 2001.

Figure 3 is constructed from the data presented in Tables 2 and 3, respectively, and illustrates the risk of partner killing by men as a function of the age difference between partners, in categories. In the figure, *1* indicates a one-category age difference, *2* indicates a two-category age difference, and so on. Positive values refer to categorical differences in which the man is older than the woman, whereas negative values refer to categorical differences in which the woman is older than the man. *0* refers to cases in which the man and woman are in the same age category. The age categories used to generate the categorical differences for Figure 3 are, in years: younger than age 25, 25 to 34 years, 35 to 44 years, 45 to 64 years, and age 65 and older. As noted in Shackelford (2001) and Mouzos and Shackelford (2004), these age groupings maximize the comparability of the results across relationship type. Figure 3 shows that, in Australia and in the United States, for marital and cohabiting relationships, partner-killing rates for women partnered to relatively older men and relatively younger men are higher than the partner-killing rate for women partnered to same-age men. In Australia and the United States, married women partnered to men who are older by two or more age categories incur the highest uxoricide risk. Different risk patterns are evident for cohabiting women in Australia and the United States. In Australia, women partnered to men who are younger by one age category incurred the highest

TABLE 2: Australia: Partner-Killings by Men per Million Married Couples per Annum and per Million Cohabiting Couples per Annum (in parentheses) by Man's Age and Woman's Age

	Woman's Age				
	25 Years or Younger	*25 to 34 Years*	*35 to 44 Years*	*45 to 64 Years*	*65 Years and Older*
Man's age					
25 years or younger	9.2 (29.1)	0.0 (0.0)	0.0 (42.7)	0.0 (0.0)	0.0 (0.0)
25 to 34 years	4.4 (32.4)	2.4 (13.6)	4.4 (41.6)	0.0 (0.0)	0.0 (0.0)
35 to 44 years	0.0 (15.4)	2.6 (27.9)	2.1 (18.4)	0.0 (37.2)	0.0 (0.0)
45 to 64 years	153.9 (0.0)	17.5 (39.4)	1.9 (22.6)	1.6 (12.9)	25.8 (0.0)
65 years and older	0.0 (0.0)	0.0 (0.0)	0.0 (0.0)	1.8 (0.0)	3.0 (0.0)

SOURCE: Australian Institute of Criminology, n.d.

TABLE 3: United States: Partner-Killings by Men per Million Married Couples per Annum and per Million Cohabiting Couples per Annum (in parentheses) by Man's Age and Woman's Age

	Woman's Age				
	25 Years or Younger	*25 to 34 Years*	*35 to 44 Years*	*45 to 64 Years*	*65 Years and Older*
Man's age					
25 years and younger	41.9 (21.3)	34.1 (26.6)	62.3 (52.6)	33.6 (17.6)	10.0 (0.0)
25 to 34 years	39.8 (35.7)	18.3 (34.9)	18.4 (68.6)	38.2 (105.3)	32.0 (0.0)
35 to 44 years	81.2 (77.8)	23.2 (75.7)	9.7 (77.6)	10.7 (75.7)	16.0 (42.1)
45 to 64 years	84.6 (48.9)	63.3 (105.3)	15.1 (101.9)	7.5 (64.0)	15.0 (30.9)
65 years and older	22.0 (0.0)	30.5 (26.3)	41.2 (197.4)	9.0 (29.8)	8.8 (22.7)

SOURCE: Shackelford, 2001.

uxoricide risk. In comparison, cohabiting women in the United States who are partnered to men older by two age categories incurred the highest uxoricide risk.

DISCUSSION

Using national-level homicide data and relevant population estimates for Australia and the United States, we calculated the rates at which men kill intimate partners, by type of relationship—cohabiting or marital, by the ages of the partners, and by the age difference between partners. Women in cohabit-

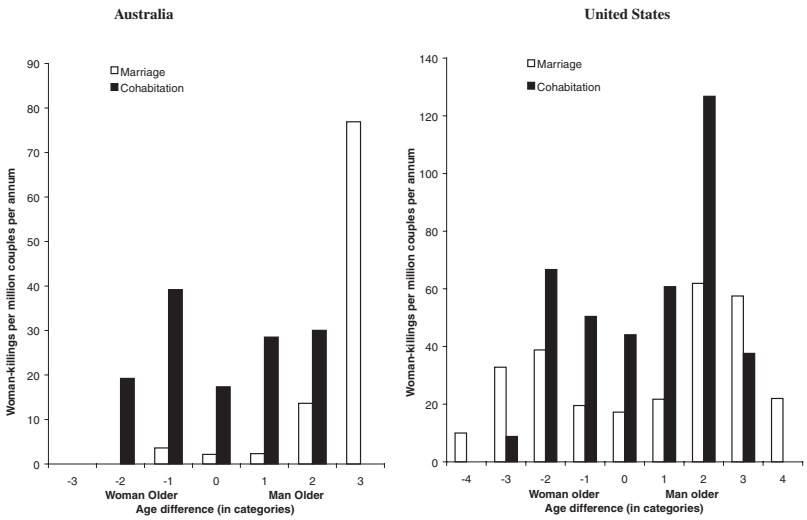

Figure 3: Partner Killings by Men per Million Couples per Annum as a Function of Relationship Type and Age Difference Between Partners, in Categories

SOURCE: Australian Institute of Criminology, n.d.; Shackelford, 2001.

ing relationships incur a much higher uxoricide risk than women in marital relationships (9.5 times higher in Australia, 8.9 times higher in the United States). This cross-national finding indicates that the increased risk of partner killing faced by cohabiting women crosses international boundaries and is not specific to the United States (or Canada, see Wilson et al., 1993; Wilson et al., 1995). The current study replicates many of the key patterns reported by Shackelford (2001) for national-level U.S. data, and those reported by Wilson and colleagues (Wilson et al., 1993; Wilson et al., 1995) for national-level Canadian data.

The replication of the findings in Australia is strong evidence that the patterns observed in the United States and Canada are not unique to those nations. Although the rates of uxoricide in marital and cohabiting relationships are lower in Australia than in the United States, the patterns are similar across the two nations. Women in cohabiting relationships are faced with an elevated uxoricide risk when compared to married women in Australia and in the United States. Another risk pattern replicated in both countries is that, within marital relationships, the uxoricide risk decreases with a woman's age. Uxoricide risk is highest for cohabiting women in the youngest age

group in Australia. In the United States, the pattern is somewhat different, with cohabiting women who are middle aged incurring the highest uxoricide risk.

Uxoricide perpetration rates are highest for younger married men in Australia and the United States. For cohabiting men, the younger men display the highest perpetration risks in Australia, whereas in the United States, the highest perpetration risk is for men older than age 45 years. The current study documents that, in Australia, uxoricide risk increases with the age difference between the partners. This finding replicates results reported by Shackelford (2001) in an examination of uxoricide in the United States.

The homicide victimization rates in the United States are higher than those in Australia (see Mouzos, 2003). The fact that the current study reveals several similarities in the patterns of uxoricide as a function of relationship type, age of the partners, and age difference between partners contributes to our understanding of differential risks of homicide victimization within intimate relationships. The findings suggest that the risk patterns observed in both nations are real and not a function of sampling error or, for example, unique features of a particular nation. Violence against women by intimate partners is a borderless crime, and as the current study demonstrated, women in some types of intimate partner relationships incur a higher risk of being killed by a partner.

Women in cohabiting relationships incur a higher risk of being killed by a partner than do married women. This finding has important implications for policy, especially because there has been a decline in the marriage rate in Western countries, with more couples living in a cohabiting, nonmarital relationship (see, e.g., Wilson, 2002). A number of plausible explanations have been generated to address why the uxoricide risk for cohabiting women is higher than for married women. Differences in demographic characteristics between those persons in cohabiting versus marital relationships have been flagged as a possible explanatory factor. For example, persons in cohabiting relationships tend to be younger, have lower education, occupation, and income levels, and are more likely to misuse alcohol (Glick & Spanier, 1980; Spanier, 1985; Stets, 1991; Stets & Straus, 1989). Although cohabiting couples are less likely to reside with children than are married couples, when children are present, they are more likely to be stepchildren (the product of previous relationships). Dawson and Gartner (1998) emphasized that this is an important difference because research has identified that the presence of stepchildren increases the uxoricide risk (Daly, Wiseman, & Wilson, 1997; Wilson et al., 1995).

Another explanation focuses on the relatively tenuous nature of cohabiting relationships, suggesting that this may account for the greater risk of part-

ner killing faced by cohabiting women. Cohabiting relationships have a higher dissolution rate than do marriages (Wu & Balakrishnan, 1992). An evolutionary psychological interpretation of this difference suggests that men in cohabiting relationships might feel less control over their partners and more threatened by intrasexual competitors. Men in cohabiting relationships, therefore, might be more likely than married men to use threats or violence (which might sometimes result in death) to establish and maintain control over their partner (Wilson et al., 1995).

The current study documented the differing risks of being killed by a partner for cohabiting women and married women in Australia and the United States. Further research is needed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the elevated risks associated with cohabiting relationships versus marital relationships. This is particularly important given the continued decline in the marriage rate in Australia and the United States. Such research might assist in determining, for example, which so-called protective factors found in marital relationships are associated with the lesser uxoricide risk. Effective intervention and prevention policies and programs will depend on a clear understanding of the mechanisms and processes by which cohabiting women are at greater risk of partner homicide than are married women.

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