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Male victims are most likely to be killed by somebody they know – usually a friend or acquaintance.shutterstock

The recent murder of Queensland policeman Brett Forte rightly received considerable public attention . But unless a man's death occurs in extremely tragic and unusual circumstances, male victims of homicide often seem to receive less attention from policymakers, the media, and the wider public than female victims.

When we think about prevention, we tend to focus on trying to tackle uncommon situations – such as “one-punch” deaths – rather than looking at the bigger picture.

Discussions of men and homicide (murder and manslaughter) usually centre on men as perpetrators, rather than victims. But even though males represent around half the population, they account for about two-thirds of Australian homicide victims.

This over-representation of male victims occurs across many countries .

Who is a 'typical' male homicide victim?

A "typical" Australian male homicide victim is most likely in his 20s or 30s , and is stabbed or beaten to death .

Homicide is generally a male-to-male crime; the perpetrator will almost always be another man .

"Stranger homicides" are infrequent. Male victims are most likely to be killed by somebody they

know – usually a friend or acquaintance.

What places men at risk of homicide?

Australian scholars have looked at various types of homicide perpetrators . However, there is little Australian research into what may place men at risk of homicide.

International studies often look only at the immediate circumstances of a death. For example, alcohol intoxication has commonly been linked with becoming a homicide victim. This offers useful insight, but focusing on short-term or “acute” circumstances only takes us so far. It can also sidetrack us from thinking about what else was going on.

Long-term , developmental contributors have been closely studied as predictors of somebody committing delinquent and anti-social behaviour, including violence.

More recently, such long-term factors have received attention in helping us understand why someone might fall victim to homicide. They include:

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social disadvantage;

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dysfunctional family backgrounds and/or absent parents;

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exposure to violence during childhood;

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parental substance abuse; and

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living in socially disorganised urban areas where poverty and crime are commonplace.

These challenges can in turn lead to other risks – such as disconnection from education, unemployment, involvement with delinquent peer groups and/or gang-related activities, and participation in a wide range of criminal behaviours.

The majority of those who have these experiences do not become homicide victims (or perpetrators). Nor do all victims (or perpetrators) have these backgrounds. But collectively, these circumstances represent red flags for lethal violence.

These possible predictors of why a male would become a homicide victim often look very similar to those that predict why a male would perpetrate homicide. This is unsurprising, because they are all factors that increase the likelihood of someone being exposed to circumstances where violence occurs.

But one of the strongest predictors of both male homicide perpetration and victimisation appears to be having been past a victim of non-lethal violence.

What can we do to reduce male homicides?

There has, in recent years, been a range of high-level strategies specifically aimed at preventing lethal violence against Australian women. Preventing lethal violence against men has received relatively less attention.

Perhaps this disparity can be explained by how preventable lethal violence against women is. For many female homicide victims, there are clear ways in which the death could have been prevented – by, for example, strengthening the responses of police, justice and social systems to violence within intimate relationships.

None of this discounts the importance of recognising, and trying to address, violence and abuse against women. But that doesn't change the fact that men in Australia still suffer twice as many murders.

From a current policy perspective, it is hard to say whether or not we view male homicide as preventable.

For instance, measures to control alcohol consumption in busy nightspots were framed against a background of preventing serious injury and violent death among young men. However, very few instances of male homicides occur in nightclub districts. So what are we doing about the rest?

Programs aimed at tackling the social and economic causes of criminal activity and violence may, if sustained over time, provide additional benefits by reducing the number of male homicides. But showing a direct link between those "general" interventions and the extremely rare and specific event of homicide will always be challenging.

Ultimately, one of the biggest barriers to reducing male homicides is that men who are killed are given little attention in public discussions about lethal violence. It seems we are sometimes inclined to accept some male victims "had it coming" because of the unsavoury lifestyles they may have led .

So, we are left with a choice: whether the links between males becoming victims of homicides and difficult-to-tackle social, economic and cultural factors make this something for the too-hard basket, or whether we are willing to gamble that tackling wider contributors to criminal activity and violence overall can deliver homicide prevention by proxy.

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