

SURVIVOR: CHARACTERISTICS AND INJURY OUTCOMES OF COWARD PUNCH ASSAULTS IN AUSTRALIA

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Overview & Findings

109 survivors suffered coward punch assaults in Victoria according to an exploratory analysis of expert opinions by forensic practitioners at the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine, between November 2012 and August 2020.

Coward punch assaults caused considerable injuries and debilitation in the survivors.

Complex and prolonged medical care was required to address and ameliorate the injury impact.



Demographic characteristics

- Survivors were predominantly males (87% males).
- Median age was 34 years (range 16-83 years).
- Survivors were unknown to their perpetrators in 48% of cases.
- Survivors were known to their perpetrators in 29% of cases. Known relationship types were acquaintances, work relationship, housemate, familial and intimate partner.
- Interpersonal data was unavailable in 23% of cases.



Location

- 64%** of survivors were assaulted in public locations. Public locations included the street, hotel, bar, nightclub, karaoke lounge, casino, public transport bays or statins, beach, shops, park, and football ground.
- 26%** of survivors were assaulted at private venues. Private venues included residential, prison, worksite, and school.
- 10%** of cases where location data was unavailable

Time of the day

- 55%** of the survivors were assaulted between 6pm to 6am.
- 24%** of survivors were assaulted during 6am- 6pm.
- Missing data was observed in **21%** of cases.

Number of Perpetrators

- Majority of the survivors were attacked by single perpetrator (65%).
- 29% of survivors were attacked by multiple perpetrators.
- Data was unavailable in 6% of cases.



Clinical Characteristics

Substance Abuse:

- [There were data limitations for this variable.]
- In 70% of the case records, substance use was not stated.
- 28% of cases reported substance use.
- Alcohol intoxication was recorded in 22% cases.

Injury Mechanisms:

- Type 1 cases were marginally more in numbers than type 2 cases.
- 57% of the survivors were Type 1 cases, i.e., there was secondary head impact against a hard surface after being punched to head.
- 43% were Type 2 cases, i.e., the survivor was punched down to the ground and further hit on head through bodily force application. The survivor was incapacitated by the initial coward punch that left him unable to defend themselves against additional inflicted trauma to head.

Neurological Signs:

- Immediate onset of neurologic signs was reported in 68 (62%) of survivors.
- Late onset neurologic signs were reported in 23 (21%) of survivors.
- No neurologic signs were observed in 12 (11%) of survivors.
- Data was unavailable in 6 (6%) of cases.

Injury Patterns

Facial Injuries:

- 45% of the survivors had facial fractures.
- 67% of the survivors has abrasions, bruises, tenderness, swelling, periorbital hematoma (black eye), laceration, discolouration, and pain.
- 11% suffered from nose bleeds.

Head Injuries:

- Cranial fractures were observed in 89% of survivors.
- 30% had abrasions, bruises, tenderness, swelling, lacerations, discolorations, or pain.
- 24% of survivors had intracranial hematoma.

Back or chest injuries:

- Abrasions, bruises, tenderness, swell, lacerations, discolouration or pain was observed in 20% of survivors.
- <5 survivors had fractures of ribs or back.

Upper extremity injuries:

- Abrasions, bruises, tenderness, swelling, lacerations, discolorations and pian in 21% of survivors.
- <5 survivors suffered upper extremity fractures.

Lower extremity injuries:

- Abrasions, bruises, tenderness, swelling, laceration, discolouration, pain, and thrombosis was seen in 12% of survivors.
- Fractures were observed in <5 survivors.



Medical Service Needs

Medical care was required in 104 or 95% of survivors.

Hospital services: 90% of survivors required hospital care.

- 44% of survivors requiring hospital care were injured by Type 1 injury mechanism (punch and ground hit).
- 46% of survivors requiring hospital services were injured by Type 2 injury mechanism (extended trauma after initial punch and ground hit).

Imaging type: Computed Tomography scans were done in 71% of survivors. Five survivors required Magnetic resonance imaging and 23% required radiographs.

Surgical Intervention: Type of surgical interventions were lifesaving, (e.g., craniectomy to relieve raised intracranial pressure) and or reconstructive surgeries, and intubation. Prolonged intensive care unit stay, sutures/staples, antibiotics and medication, and physiotherapy and general practitioner consultations for the post-surgical period. Data was not available consistently for disaggregation into these categories

PERPETRATOR: CHARACTERISTICS AND SENTENCING OUTCOMES IN FATAL COWARD PUNCH ASSAULTS IN AUSTRALIA

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Overview & Findings

At least 288 offenders were convicted for a fatal coward punch assault in Australia in the period 1990-2020. These offender cases involved 235 violent incidents and 258 victims.



Demographic characteristics of perpetrators

- Single perpetrator-single victim: 71.3% of 178 trials.
- 28.7% of the trials were either: single perpetrator-multiple victims (6.7%); multiple perpetrators-single victim (17.4%); multiple perpetrators–multiple victims (5%).
- Perpetrators were predominantly males (98.6% males)
- Perpetrators had a median age of 26 years ranging from 15-69 years.
- Perpetrators were unknown or strangers to their victims in 55% of cases.
- Perpetrators were known to their victims in 42% of cases.



Substance abuse by perpetrators

- 187** [64.9%] of perpetrators involved substance use.
- 52** cases where the substance was unspecified.
- 55%** of cases where Alcohol and drugs in isolation, and alcohol and drugs combined, were present.

Demographic characteristics of victims

- Median age 41 years [range 14-89].
- Predominantly males [92.6%].
- 67.4% of the victims were Type 1 cases, i.e., there was a secondary head impact against a hard surface after being punched to head.
- 32.6% were Type 2 cases, i.e., the victim was punched down to the ground and further hit on the head through
- 74% of the incidents occurred between 6pm to 6am.

bodily force application. Victim was incapacitated by the initial coward punch that left them unable to defend themselves against additional inflicted trauma to head.

In terms of location, 65.1% of incidents occurred in public locations, 33.6% of incidents occurred at private venues, <5 cases had unavailable data.



- 62.2%** of perpetrators had a sentencing outcome of imprisonment.
- 19.4%** had community-based orders or procedural outcomes. (Procedural outcome meant retrial, acquittal, failed appeal, trial ongoing, offender’s visa was cancelled/offender was deported.)
- 9.4%** had a combined outcome of either imprisonment, monetary penalty, community-based order and/or procedural outcomes.
- 2.1%** had a case dismissed outcome.

Offence Outcomes

- 60.4% perpetrators were charged with manslaughter.
- 15.6% perpetrators were charged with murder.
- 10.8% perpetrators were charged with coward punch-specific offences or laws.
- 8.9% perpetrators were charged with causing injury or assault.



Sentence Length

- Murder, 18.0 years [range 17.3-20.0].
- Coward punch-specific offence, 6.2 years [range 4.3-9.0].
- Manslaughter, 7.0 years [range 3.8-8.0].
- Causing injury or assault, 2 years [range 1.0-4.9].