

Intimate Partner Homicide

in Oregon, 1997-2003

“When [he] left this world, he had little with any meaning and took what he valued with him...He bought a gun...[and] seven gallons of lacquer thinner.” He shot his wife and son, then set their home on fire and killed himself.¹

“[His girlfriend] died of at least 10 blows to her head and face from a meat cleaver. A criminal scientist testified that blood spatter showed she was fending off blows and trying to get away.²”

“[The victim was] shot to death by her estranged husband as she was sitting in her car near her aunt and uncle’s home. [He] approached her Toyota and shot her in front of her two young children. He then took the children back to his apartment building, where he locked them in the hallway, called 911 to say he’d killed his wife, and then shot and killed himself. The shooting occurred just after a court hearing to modify a restraining order with regard to his visitation of the children.³”

Background

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a major public health problem in the United States, with 8% of men and nearly 25% of women reporting rape and/or physical assault by an intimate partner at some time in their lives.⁴ The overall risk of IPV is three times higher for women than for men, but these rates vary even more dramatically as the severity of the assault increases, with female victims far more likely to sustain serious injuries or death.^{4,5} Intimate partner homicide, the most extreme form of IPV, is usually preceded by a history of abuse.^{6,7} Nationally, about one third of all female homicide victims are killed by an intimate partner, compared to about 5% of male victims.⁸

Intimate partner homicide in Oregon: A seven year review

We identified and described all intimate partner homicides in Oregon that occurred over a seven-year period. Although intimate partner homicides can involve additional victims (e.g. an ex-husband kills his former wife and her new partner), we did not have a systematic way to identify all of these IPV-related homicides until 2003. Therefore, all aggregate data only concern

the primary dyad of perpetrator and intimate partner/victim. A small section on IPV-related homicides occurring in 2003 is included at the end of this report.

<i>Women were almost five times as likely to be killed by an intimate partner than were men.</i>	Between 1997 and 2003, 748 homicides occurred among Oregonians age 12 and older, 525 among men and 223 among women. We used newspaper articles and obituaries to exclude homicides that were clearly not IPV-related and reviewed medical examiner files for the remaining cases. We defined intimate partners as current or former spouses, current or former boyfriends/girlfriends, or dates. Couples could be same-sex or opposite-sex. From our records review, we determined that intimate partners killed 102 (46%) of the female homicide victims and 21 (4%) of the male homicide victims (total n=123). Overall, women were almost five times as likely to be killed by an intimate partner than were men (average annual, sex-specific intimate partner homicide rates were 1.0/100,000 for women >12 years compared to .21 for men >12 years).
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Who were the victims?

For the purposes of this study, a perpetrator is the person who kills, the victim is the one killed. These are value-neutral terms that are unrelated to any history of violence perpetration that may have preceded the homicide.

Intimate partner homicide victims ranged from age 14 to 86 for female victims and age 19 to 78 for male victims, with a median age of 37 years for women and 43 years for men. Victims were predominantly non-Hispanic whites (n=107, 87%) and 44% (n=54) of victims were married.

Perpetrator-victim relationships

Most victims were killed by a current spouse or partner. Specifically, 40% (n=49) were killed by a current spouse, 25% (n=31) by a current boyfriend or girlfriend, 20% by an estranged spouse (n=25), 12% by a former boyfriend/girlfriend (n=15), and 2% by a date (n=2). Sixty-four percent of victims (n=79) were living with the perpetrator when the homicide occurred.

All male victims were killed by females and the vast majority of females (n=100, 98%) were killed by males. Same-sex intimate partner homicides may be a rare phenomenon in Oregon or may be underreported due to misclassification of perpetrator-victim relationships in medical examiner and police records (e.g. listing a same-sex partner as a “friend” or “roommate”). National data indicate that 11-15% of people in same-sex relationships report IPV, with male couples experiencing more violence than female couples.⁴ In a national review of over 45,000 intimate partner homicides, .05% involved same-sex female couples and 6.2% involved same-sex male couples.⁸

Where did the homicides occur?

Between 1997-2003, 23 of 36 Oregon counties (67%) reported an IPV homicide. Most cases (n=88, 71%) occurred in metropolitan areas.⁹ Overall, the rate of intimate partner homicide was slightly higher for non-metropolitan areas, but not significantly so (average annual rates for population >12 years=.66/100,000 vs. .60/100,000). The small number of cases that occurred in any given year, in each county, prevents us from comparing rates at the county level. Most homicides were committed in the victim’s home (n=86, 70%).

Firearms were the most common weapon used to kill both men and women.

Types of weapons used

Firearms were the most common weapon used to kill both men (n=15, 71%) and women (n=62, 60%). Weapons such as knives or blunt objects were used to kill all other male victims (n=6, 28%) and 14% (n=14) of the female victims. Twelve females (12%) died of strangulation (either ligature or manual) and 14 (14%) were killed with bodily force alone.

History of IPV and self-defense

At least 43% of all victims (n=52) had a documented history of IPV, but histories were not consistently recorded in medical examiner files and the level of detail varied. Therefore, forty-two percent should be seen as a minimum number and only a general indicator. Research shows that homicide is frequently the culmination of a long history of IPV, with 67-80% of intimate partner homicides preceded by physical abuse of the female partner by the male, regardless of which partner is killed.^{9,10,11,12} In order to determine whether any Oregon homicides were committed in self-defense, we interviewed the primary investigating law enforcement officer for those cases where motive was ambiguous. At least 6 homicides were determined by authorities to have been committed in self-defense and the perpetrator was not charged with a crime. All self-defense cases involved female perpetrators and male victims.

Homicide-suicides

Forty-three perpetrators (35%) killed themselves after killing their partners. Males were 10.5 times more likely to commit suicide after the homicide than were females (42% vs. 4%, p=.002). Perpetrators who used firearms to kill their victims were almost five times more likely to commit suicide than those using other weapons (51% vs. 11%, p<.001). There were no other statistically significant differences between homicide-suicides and homicides.

Forty percent of victims had dependent children living with them at the time of the homicide.

Children orphaned, endangered, and killed

Forty percent of victims (n=48) had dependent children living with them at the time of the homicide, with a total of 87 children affected. In 19 homicides (15%), a child or children witnessed the event and 13 children were murdered along with their mothers in six separate “familicide” cases. Men committed all murders involving both intimate partners and children. A large body of literature details the profound consequences of children’s exposure to violence, including the development of a wide range of physical, psychological, and emotional problems.^{13,14,15}

Yearly trends

Intimate partner homicides in Oregon have remained relative stable over the past seven years of surveillance, with an average, annual rate of fewer than 1/100,000 Oregonians age 12 years and older. The number of cases has ranged from a low of 14 in 1999 to a high of 21 in years 2000 and 2001 (mean: 18 cases).

IPV-related homicides in 2003

In 2003, Oregon received funding to initiate a statewide violent death reporting system (OVDRS). Among its many functions, the OVDRS allows us to systematically identify all homicides related to IPV. In addition to the 14 individuals killed in 2003 by an intimate partner, there were 12 IPV-related homicides. These included six current partners killed by their lover’s ex-partner (e.g. “love triangle” victims), two friends of an IPV homicide victim, and four IPV perpetrators killed by law enforcement during the course of a domestic violence call. Therefore, of the 100 homicides committed in Oregon in 2003, about one fourth (n=26, 26%) were related to IPV.

In conclusion

Between 1997-2003, 123 Oregonians were killed by intimate partners. The data show that the risk of intimate partner homicide for Oregon women is almost five times higher than for Oregon men. Most victims were killed at home, with a firearm, by a current spouse or partner, most likely within the context of ongoing violence. Clearly, when it comes to IPV, homicide is the tip of the iceberg: a small, but visible portion of a large--and largely hidden--problem.

¹ Anderson DR. Portland family's death fits grim national trend. *The Oregonian*; Portland, OR: June 4, 1997.

² Staff. Man gets 25-year term for meat cleaver killing. *The Register-Guard*; Eugene, OR: June 7, 2002.

³ Bernstein M. Portland's 2001 homicides. *The Oregonian*; Portland, OR: January 7, 2002.

⁴ Tjaden P, Thoennes N. Extent, nature, and consequences of intimate partner violence. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, 2000; DOJ publication no NCJ 181867.

⁵ Rennison CM, Welchans S. Intimate partner violence. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice. 2000; DOJ publication no NCJ 178247.

⁶ Campbell JC. "If I can't have you, no one can": power and control in homicide of female partners. In: Radford J, Russell DEH, eds. *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing*. New York, NY: Twayne; 1992:99-113.

⁷ Moracco KE, Runyan CW, Butts JD. Female intimate partner homicide: A population-based study. *JAMWA*, 2003; 58:20-25.

⁸ Paulozzi LJ, Saltzman LE, Thompsn MP, Holmgreen P. Surveillance for homicides among intimate partners: United States, 1981-1998. *MMWR*, 2001; 50, SS-3.

⁹ Metropolitan designation based on U.S. Census definition, which includes the following counties: Benton, Clackamas, Columbia, Jackson, Lane, Marion, Multnomah, Polk, Washington, and Yamhill. The remaining 26 Oregon counties are defined as non-metropolitan.

¹⁰ Office of Justice Programs. Bureau of Justice Statistics Factbook: Violence by Intimates—Analysis of Data on Crimes by Current or Former Spouses, Boyfriends, and Girlfriends. Washington, DC: US Dept of Justice; 1998.

¹¹ Mercy JA, Saltzman LE. Fatal violence among spouses in the United States: 1976-85. *Am J Public Health*, 1989;79:595-599.

¹² Campbell JC, Webster D, Koziol-McLain J, Block C, Campbell D, Curry MA, et al. Risk Factors for Femicide in Abusive Relationships: Results From a Multisite Case Control Study *Am J Public Health*, 2003; 93:1089-97.

¹³ Campbell JC, Lewandowski LA. Mental and physical health effects of intimate partner violence on women and children. *Anger, Aggression, and Violence*, 1997; 20: 353-374.

¹⁴ McFarlane JM, Groff JY, O'Brien JA, Watson K. Behaviors of children who are exposed and not exposed to intimate partner violence: An analysis of 330 Black, White, and Hispanic children. *Pediatrics*, 2003; 112: e202-e206.

¹⁵ Eth S, Pynoos RS. Children traumatized by witnessing acts of personal violence: Homicide, rape, or suicidal behavior. In Eth S, Pynoos RS (eds): *Post-traumatic Stress Disorder in Children*. Washington, DC, American Psychiatric Press; 1985, 17-33.

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