

A new study examines the connection between intimate partner violence and alcohol and drug use. Researchers have found that increased substance use results in more severe violence, male perpetrators were more often problem drinkers, and female victims were less likely to use alcohol.



## Risky Mix: Drinking, Drug Use, and Homicide

by Phyllis Sharps, Jacquelyn C. Campbell, Doris Campbell, Faye Gary, and Daniel Webster

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A study on patterns of alcohol and drug use in the murder or attempted murder of women by their intimate partners showed a strong and direct relationship between substance use and such violence.

This study examines the connection between alcohol and drug use and intimate partner violence, both during the incident and in the year leading up to it. The researchers found that higher levels of substance use by the offenders (and to a lesser extent, by the victims) tracked closely with more severe violence. Notably, although both partners may have regularly used alcohol before the homicide, attempted homicide, or the most severe violent incident of abuse, more male partners than female victims were problem drinkers. Also, during these violent incidents, more male partners than their female victims used alcohol.

As other articles in this issue state, intimate partner violence, the most common form of violence against women, is a key prelude to the murder of women by their partners. Alcohol and drugs are involved in more than half of these homicides,<sup>1</sup> and men who batter their partners also frequently abuse alcohol.<sup>2</sup> In this study, strikingly high rates of alcohol and drug use were reported for males who murdered or attempted to murder their female partners. These findings reinforce the already documented complex relationship between substance use by men and violence against women.

**Focus of Study**

The researchers looked at women from 10 geographically diverse U.S. cities, examining patterns of substance use by homicide or attempted homicide victims, abuse victims, and nonabused women and by their male partners. The study focused on three groupings: (1) women who were victims of homicide or attempted homicide and their partners, (2) abused women who were not targets of attempted homicide and their partners, and (3) nonabused women and their part-

**Table 1: Alcohol and drug use by victims and their partners in the year prior to the killing or attempted killing of women or the worst violent incident**

Substance	Homicide/ Attempted Homicide (%)		Abused (%)		Nonabused (%)	
	Women	Partners	Women	Partners	Women	Partners
<b>Alcohol</b>						
Drunk every day	—	35.1	—	11.6	—	1.2
Problem drinker	13.0	49.2	7.0	31.1	1.7	6.2
Drinks per episode						
1–2	64.6	24.4	61.4	35.1	77.7	65.8
3–4	22.9	17.1	27.9	27.2	18.2	25.5
5–6	8.9	24.8	7.9	18.2	3.8	4.8
7+	3.7	33.7	2.9	19.5	.03	3.9
Ever been in alcohol treatment	27.7	13.5	13.3	18.1	57.1	19.2
<b>Drugs</b>						
Use drugs	18.4	54.2	13.4	25.0	6.7	4.3
Ever been in drug treatment	20.6	11.3	3.5	12.4	14.3	21.4

ners. Because homicide victims and their partners were so similar to attempted homicide victims and their partners—in terms of demographics, the dynamics of the relationship, and other factors such as prior abuse and stalking<sup>3</sup>—the researchers combined these two groups in the study.

**Patterns of Alcohol and Drug Use**

In the year before the murder, attempted murder, or the most severe violent incident, female victims used alcohol and drugs less frequently than their partners did, and they consumed less of either

*Although there is likely a relationship between women’s alcohol use and intimate partner violence and homicide, this study found an increased risk of victimization arising primarily from the offenders’— rather than from the victims’— substance use.*

**Table 2: Substance use during the killing or attempted killing of women or the worst violent incident**

Substance Use	Homicide/Attempted Homicide		Abuse	
	Victims (N=456) %	Perpetrators (N=456) %	Victims (N=427) %	Perpetrators (N=427) %
Alcohol	14.6	31.3	8.9	21.0
Drugs	3.3	12.6	1.6	6.7
Both	4.7	26.2	0.9	5.8
None	77.4	29.9	88.5	65.8

substance when they did drink or use drugs (see table 1). This pattern largely mirrors that in the general population.<sup>4</sup> Still, 13 percent of the female intimate partner homicide and attempted homicide victims, 7 percent of the abuse victims, and less than 2 percent of the nonabused women were problem drinkers. These rates are similar to those for abused women who went for treatment in hospital emergency departments.<sup>5</sup>

During the homicide, attempted homicide, or the most severe violent incident, the victims also were less likely than their partners to be drinking or using drugs (see table 2).

Previous studies found that almost two-thirds of female homicide victims tested negative for alcohol at the time of death.<sup>6</sup> In this study, more than three-quarters of the victims of the homicide or attempted homicide of women and almost 90 percent of the abused women did not consume alcohol, either at the time of their murder or the most serious violent incident. In contrast, more than 80 percent of males who killed or abused a female partner were problem drinkers in the year before the incident. They drank more frequently than their victims, and they tended to binge drink. Other studies report that more than half of these killers drank just before or at the time of the murder.<sup>7</sup>

The current findings on substance use in the homicide or attempted homicide of women show less use by both parties than prior studies. But the findings confirm the same pattern of male offenders being more likely than their female victims to drink alcohol or use drugs at the time of the incidents.

Several other findings provide insight into the role of substance use in intimate partner violence. For example, during the homicide, attempted homicide, or the most severe incident of violence, the offender typically used alcohol or drugs. Significantly,

- More homicide and attempted homicide offenders than those men who abused or did not abuse their partners were described either as drunk every day or as a problem drinker or drug user (see table 1).
- More than two-thirds of the homicide and attempted homicide offenders used alcohol, drugs, or both during the incident; less than one-fourth of the victims did (see table 2).
- More than one-fourth of the homicide and attempted homicide offenders used both alcohol and drugs during the incident, while just under 6 percent of the partner abusers used both substances during the most violent incident (see table 2).

## STUDY METHODS

The researchers studied risk factors for the killing of women in violent intimate relationships in 10 geographically diverse cities: Baltimore, MD; Houston, TX; Kansas City, KS; Kansas City, MO; Los Angeles, CA; New York, NY; Portland, OR; Seattle, WA; St. Petersburg/Tampa, FL; and Wichita, KS.<sup>1</sup>

Cases involving the murder or attempted murder of women by their intimate partners were identified from closed police, district attorney, medical examiner, and trauma records. For the homicide victims, most of the data came from telephone interviews of a proxy informant, a person who knew a lot about the victim's relationship with the offender. Proxy informants most often were mothers, friends, sisters, or other family members of the murdered women.

Similar records helped the researchers identify and contact the attempted homicide survivors. These women survived a gunshot, stabbing, or serious assault carried out by an intimate partner with a clear intent to kill.

The abused women studied were between 18 and 50 years old and were "romantically or sexually involved with the perpetrator at some time during the past 2 years." In the study, a woman was categorized as abused if she had been physically assaulted, threatened with serious violence, or stalked by a current or former intimate partner.

Sample sizes for each city were set based on the annual rate of intimate partner homicide in that city. The nonabused women in the study were selected from the same cities as the homicide and attempted homicide victims and the abused women, using a random-digit-dialing telephone method. The nonabused group also included women who had been romantically or sexually involved sometime during the past 2 years but who had not been physically assaulted, threatened with serious violence, or stalked by a current or former intimate partner.

Details on sample recruitment and on data collection tools and methods are described in "The Role of Alcohol Use in Intimate Partner Femicide."<sup>2</sup> (Femicide is a term that means the murder of women by their intimate partners.)

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## Using the Findings to Keep Women Safe

Although there is likely a relationship between women's alcohol use and intimate partner violence and homicide, this study found an increased risk of victimization arising primarily from the offenders'—rather than from the victims'—substance use.<sup>8</sup>

Alcohol or drugs alone do not cause violence between intimate partners. Yet, a significant relationship seems to exist between men's alcohol or drug use and violence by them against their intimate female partners. These findings show that a violent intimate relationship in which the male abuser is a problem drinker—characterized by frequent weekly and binge drinking—or a drug user is

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particularly dangerous. The findings also point out that serious alcohol use by males who abuse their partners increases the risk for fatal or violent victimization of women involved in such relationships.

### Limitations of the Study

This study contained several limitations. First, proxy informants reported on the use of alcohol and drugs by female homicide victims and their partners. Such reports on a lost daughter, sister, or mother may be inaccurate. Perhaps the informants were in denial about the substance use or just wanted to protect the reputation of their relative—or the offender. Or a victim may not have revealed to these informants the full extent of her own or her abuser's substance use.

Second, data on the context of substance use were limited. For example, the study did not ask when substances were used, whether substance use was more likely by the couple alone or with others, or if the victim's use of alcohol or drugs started before or after the abuse. Nor did the study determine how the substance use affected the violence. To understand the relationship between violence in intimate relationships and substance use, the context of use—such as the social setting, which can influence the type and amount of use, the rules and norms for behavior, and the meanings each partner attaches to substance use and violent behavior<sup>9</sup>—also must be studied.

Third, African Americans with limited education and low incomes were overrepresented in the sample of female victims of intimate partner homicide and attempted homicide, perhaps because they had fewer resources to address alcohol and drug problems, including limited social support systems. In addition, African-American males who murdered or attempted to murder their partners more frequently reported that they had a low level of education, were unemployed, and were not looking for work than did others who carried out these same violent acts. An earlier study showed that these same characteristics were directly related to intimate partner violence against women.<sup>10</sup>

It is also possible that the overrepresentation of African-American women among the sample of female victims of intimate partner homicide and attempted homicide resulted from how the sampling was done. African-American abuse victims living in poverty and the proxies of those killed may have been easier to find because they lacked the resources to relocate. Due to the above limitations, generalizing from the results of this study may be somewhat problematic. Still, poverty is an important factor because other research shows that increased alcohol use and violence against women often occur within the context of poverty.

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### Notes

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