

Intimate Partner Homicide

in Oregon, 1997-2001

“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 five year review

The purpose of this study was to identify and describe all intimate partner homicides in Oregon that occurred over a five-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. Therefore, these data only concern the primary dyad of perpetrator and intimate partner/victim.

Women were four times as likely to be killed by an intimate partner than were men.

Between 1997 and 2001, 538 homicides occurred among Oregonians age 12 and older, 387 among men and 151 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 75 (50%) of the female homicide victims and 17 (4%) of the male homicide victims (total n=92). Overall, women were four 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 .24 for men ≥ 12 years).

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 78 for female victims and age 19-58 for male victims, with a median age of 38 years for women and 39 years for men. Victims were predominantly non-Hispanic whites (n=80, 87%) and 47% (n=43) of victims were married.

Perpetrator-victim relationships

Most victims were killed by a current spouse or partner. Specifically, 41% (n=38) were killed by a current spouse, 25% (n=23) by a current boyfriend or girlfriend, 23% by an estranged spouse (n=21), 10% by a former boyfriend/girlfriend (n=9), and 1% by a date (n=1). Sixty three percent of victims (n=58) were living with the perpetrator when the homicide occurred.

All female victims were killed by males and all males were killed by females. Same-sex intimate partner homicides occur less frequently than opposite-sex intimate partner homicides, but their complete absence in our data may be due to misclassification of perpetrator-victim relationships in medical examiner and police records (e.g. listing a same-sex partner as a “friend” or “room-mate”). 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 1997-2001, 21 of 36 Oregon counties (58%) reported an IPV homicide. Most cases (n=63, 68%) 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=.75/100,000 vs. .6/100,000). 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=67, 73%).

Types of weapons used

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

Firearms were the most common weapon used to kill both men (n=12, 70%) and women (n=47, 63%). Weapons such as knives or blunt objects were used to kill all other male victims (n=5, 30%) and 15% (n=11) of the female victims. Nine females (12%) died of strangulation (either ligature or manual) and 8 (11%) were killed with bodily force alone.

History of IPV and self-defense

At least 40% of both male and female victims (n=38) had a history of IPV recorded in their medical examiner file, but histories were not consistently recorded and the level of detail varied. Therefore, forty 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.^{6,10,11,12} 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 5 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 homicide victims.

Homicide-suicides

Thirty-four perpetrators (37%) killed themselves after killing their partners. Males were seven times more likely to commit suicide after the homicide than were females (44% vs. 6%, $p=.003$). Perpetrators who used firearms to kill their victims were four times more likely to commit suicide than those using other weapons (51% vs. 12%, $p<.001$). There were no other statistically significant differences between homicide-suicides and homicides.

Children were present far too often

More than one third of victims had dependent children living with them at the time of the homicide.

More than one third of victims (n=34, 37%) had dependent children living with them at the time of the homicide, with a total of 61 children affected. Of those, 21 (34%) witnessed the homicide and 5 (8%) were murdered along with their mothers in three separate "familicide" cases. Men committed all murders involving

both intimate partners and children. A large body of literature details the profound effects on children of witnessing violence, such as the development of a wide range of physical, psychological, and emotional problems.^{13,14,15}

In conclusion

Between 1997-2001, 92 Oregonians were killed by their intimate partners. The data show that the risk of intimate partner homicide for Oregon women is four 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.

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- ⁹Metropolitan 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.
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