

Women who have committed homicide

Homicide is the killing of one person by another. In Canada, homicide is classified as first degree murder, second degree murder, manslaughter or infanticide.

In 1991, men were 10 times more likely to be accused in a homicide incident than women.² On average in 1992, for each man who was killed by his wife, more than three women were killed by their husbands.³

Generally, while research examining homicide trends observes them across genders, very little research has specifically looked at homicide committed by women in Canada. Public perception is that most women convicted of homicide have killed their husbands to put an end to years of abuse. While this may be true for some women, it does not appear to represent the majority of homicides committed by female offenders.

The Women Offenders Sector of the Correctional Service of Canada is conducting a study of federally sentenced⁴ women convicted of homicide who were under the purview of the Correctional Service of Canada (incarcerated or on conditional release) as of December 1996. The goal is a more accurate profile of female homicide offenders in Canada. In this article, we present some preliminary results of this research.

Methodology

A literature review was conducted on women convicted of homicide to identify what variables should be included in the study. Homicide was defined as first degree murder, second degree, non-capital murder or manslaughter in this study.⁵ Data were collected using the Offender Management System (OMS) as well as a questionnaire designed to collect any missing information that could not be gathered through the OMS. (When variables had missing data, percentages were calculated on the basis of available information.)

The sample

The study reviewed the cases of 170 female offenders incarcerated or on conditional release for a homicide offence as of December 1996. These offenders accounted for just over one quarter (28%) of all federal women offenders.⁶ Of the sample cases, 53% were incarcerated, 45% were under supervision in the community, 1% were unlawfully at large and 1% had been deported.

Demographics

Homicides occurred most frequently in the Ontario and Prairie regions, accounting for 35% and 23%, respectively, of the homicides committed by the sample. This is consistent with results found in 1992 with the exception that, in 1996, the Prairie Region had a lower percentage of homicides than it did in

1992.⁷ In the sample of women, 69% were Caucasian, 22% were Aboriginal, 6% were Black and 3% were Asiatic. East Indian women accounted for less than 1% of the sample. Aboriginal women are overrepresented in this sample as they only account for 2% of the total Canadian population.⁸

The majority of women offenders convicted of homicide were convicted of second degree murder or manslaughter. Of the non-Aboriginal women (78% of the sample), 11% were convicted of first degree murder, 50% of second degree murder, 34% of manslaughter and 5% of non-capital murder. Of the Aboriginal women (22% of the sample), 3% were convicted of first degree murder, 32% for second degree murder, 60% for manslaughter and 5% for non-capital murder. This overrepresentation of Aboriginal women convicted of manslaughter is supported by previous findings.⁹

The average age at the time of the offence was 31 years, while for Aboriginal women alone it was 28 years. Overall, however, the ages varied from 16 to 63 years, with the majority of women offenders falling within the range of 20 to 40 years.

Offender's life at the time of the homicide

At the time of the homicide, 28% of the women had achieved a Grade 8 education or less, while 72% had completed a Grade 9 education or higher. Eighteen percent had a postsecondary education.

The majority of the women (54%) were unemployed at the time of the offence, while 22% had stable employment, 12% were employed by the sex-trade industry, 5% had unstable or sporadic employment and 2% were students. Their main source of income at the time of the homicide included social assistance (41%), stable employment (30%), help from others (12%), illegal activities (8%) and other sources of income such as pension (2%). Seven percent had no source of income at the time of the offence.

At the time of the homicide, almost two thirds of the offenders were living with their marital husband, common-law husband or male/female partner.¹⁰ Single women accounted for one third of the sample. Sixteen percent were divorced or separated and 1% were widowed. Approximately 70% of the women had children, with one third of the women with children being single mothers.

The offender's social history

More than two thirds of the women (69%) had a history of past substance abuse, whether it was alcohol, drugs or both alcohol and drugs.¹¹

Most of the women (63%) did not have a history of mental health problems. Of the 37% who did, it was difficult to determine the type of mental health problem because a substantial amount of data was missing.

The vast majority of the women (84%) had a history of being abused, physically, sexually or emotionally. The most frequent types of abusers were parents, step parents and common-law/ marital husbands. They represented the source of abuse in 45% of the sample.

The offender's criminal history

Almost half of the women convicted of homicide (48%) did not have a record of any previous convictions. Of the balance, 17% had one or two previous convictions, 17% had three to seven, 7% had eight to ten and 11% had more than ten previous convictions. Most convictions were for offences other than homicide. Of those with previous convictions, approximately 66% had been convicted for theft-related crimes, 60% for disturbing the peace, 58% for disrupting the process of justice, 46% for harm/threatening to cause harm and 30% for drug- and alcohol-related offences. Only 6 of the 170 offenders had previously been convicted for homicide.

Research indicates that women convicted of homicide are more likely to be rated lower risk and lower need than other federally sentenced women.¹² Accordingly, they are generally considered to be at lower risk for violent recidivism.¹³ Studies have shown, however, that it was the women previously convicted of manslaughter who tended to reoffend. In addition, it is noteworthy that these women had higher rates of recidivism when on mandatory supervision (now called statutory release) compared to when they were released on full parole.¹⁴

Victim's characteristics

Seventy-nine percent of the victims were Caucasian, 12% were Aboriginal, 4% were Asiatic, 3% were Black, 2% were East Indian and less than 1% were of Arabic decent.

About three quarters of the victims were male, with an average age of 37 years.

While the victims ranged in age from newborn to 83 years old, the most frequently occurring age range was 25 to 42 years. Interestingly, 15% of the victims were 8 years old or younger.

In the vast majority of the homicides (97%) there was one victim. Five offenders had two victims.

Two thirds of the women did not live with their victims at the time of the homicide.

The relationship of the victims to the offenders in these homicides is shown in Figure 1. Contrary to public perception, the offender's intimate partner accounted for only about one quarter (27%) of the victims; about three quarters of victims (73%) were not an intimate partner of the offender.

The extent to which the offender and victim in the homicides knew each other is as follows: 36% of victims and offenders were relatives (including both female and male partners in some cases), 46% were

acquaintances and 17% were strangers.

Fifty-three percent of the victims did not have a history of conflict with the offender.

Figure 1

Relationship of Victim to Offender

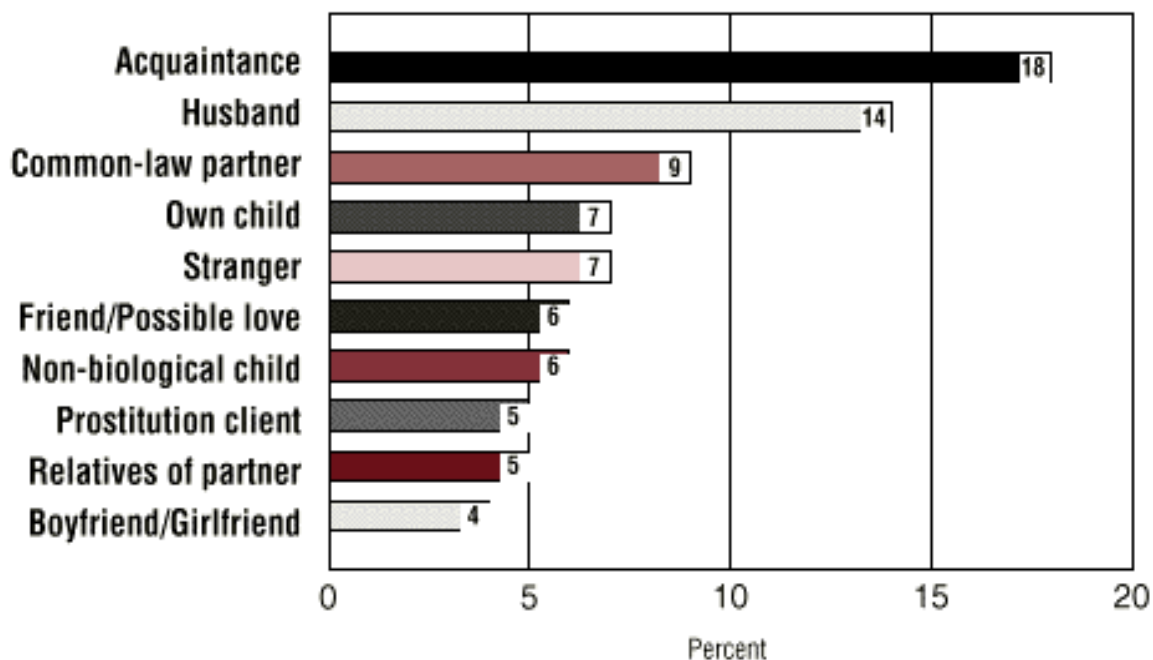
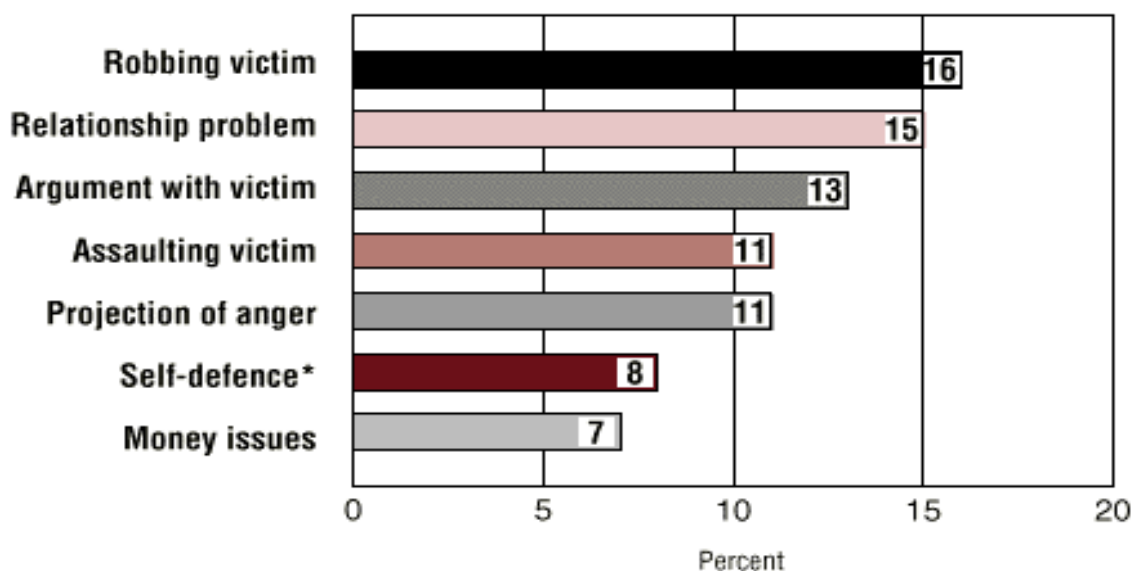


Figure 2

Circumstances of Homicide



Note: *for the purpose of this study, self-defence was defined as reported cases where the offender killed the victim who was assaulting her (it did not necessarily occur with an abusive partner).

Circumstances of the homicide

As shown in Figure 2, the most frequent context in which a homicide occurred was during the commission of another offence, specifically robbery. This was the context for 16% of the homicides. The second most common circumstance related to relationship problems, which was the context for 15% of the homicides.

Most of the homicides (63%) were unplanned.

About one third occurred in the home of the victim, and one quarter took place in the home shared by the victim and the offender.

The most frequent activity the victim was engaged in at the time of the homicide was sleeping, being passed out or lying down, which was the case in about one quarter of the homicides. In 18% of the cases, the victim was arguing with the offender at the time of the homicide.

The most frequently used weapon in the homicides was a knife, representing the weapon of choice in one third of the cases. This was followed by a gun, used by 21% of the sample. Accordingly, the principal causes of death were stab wounds and gunshot wounds. Both bodily force and a weapon were used by 14% of the women, and bodily force only was used by 10%.

Forty-two percent of the women had one co-accused or more, the majority of whom were male. It seems the co-accused was most frequently a friend or acquaintance, but a great portion of data concerning this variable was missing.

Fifty-four percent of the offenders and 53% of the victims had used alcohol at the time of the offence, while 38% of offenders and 29% of victims had used drugs. Taking into account that about two thirds of the women had a history of substance abuse and most used alcohol at the time of the homicide, substance abuse would seem to be a target area for intervention.

Summary

Women convicted of homicide are generally Caucasian, married, unemployed and mothers. Aboriginal women are overrepresented among women convicted of homicide, accounting for 22% of the sample.

On average, the women are 31 years of age, have achieved a Grade 9 education or higher and are first-time offenders. Often they have a history of physical, sexual or emotional abuse as well as a history of substance abuse. Contrary to the popular myth that many of these women kill their spouse to end years of abuse, homicides were more likely to have occurred during the course of a robbery.

The most common conviction for a homicide offence was second degree murder or manslaughter.

The victim was usually a Caucasian male, 37 years of age, known by the offender as a friend or an acquaintance. At the same time, however, 15% of the homicides involved the death of a child in the care of the offender.

The most commonly used weapon was a knife.

Almost half of the homicides (48%) occurred while both the offender and the victim were under the influence of alcohol.

While these results are preliminary, further examination of this data will permit development of a more accurate profile. Note: for the purpose of this study, self-defence was defined as reported cases where the offender killed the victim who was assaulting her (it did not necessarily occur with an abusive partner).

1. Women Offender Sector, Correctional Service of Canada, 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0P9.
2. M. Wilson and M. Daly, "Spousal Homicide," *Juristat*, 14, 8 (1994): 1.
3. Wilson and Daly, "Spousal Homicide."
4. "Federally sentenced" is defined as having received a sentence of more than two years which will be served in a federal institution.
5. There were no reported cases of infanticide in the sample.
6. Federally Sentenced Women's Program, *The November 21, 1996 Census of Federally Sentenced Women* (Correctional Service of Canada, Ottawa, 1996).
7. Federally Sentenced Women's Program, *Census*.
8. Statistics Canada. *Census of Population 1991: Projection of Persons with Aboriginal Ancestry*, Canada, Provinces/Regions and Territories. (Ottawa, 1991): 20 16, 12 and 44.
9. T. Nouwens, *A Profile of Women Who Commit Murder and Manslaughter*, Master's thesis (Ottawa: University of Ottawa, 1991).
10. Risk of spousal homicide is far greater in common-law marriages than in registered marriages, for both men and women. See Wilson and Daly, "Spousal Homicide."
11. The use of drugs includes the use of illicit drugs such as marijuana and heroin, the abuse of prescription drugs such as valium and the use of solvents such as gasoline and glue.

12. Federally Sentenced Women's Program. *Proceedings: National Workshop to Develop a Community Strategy for Federally Sentenced Women, March 5-7, 1996, Toronto, Ontario* (Ottawa: Correctional Research and Development, Correctional Service of Canada, 1996).
13. K. Blanchette, "The Relationship between Criminal History, Mental Disorder, and Recidivism among Federally Sentenced Women," Master's thesis (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1996).
14. R. Belcourt, T. Nouwens and L. Lefebvre, "Examining the Unexamined: Recidivism among Female Offenders," *Forum on Corrections Research*, 5, 3 (1993): 10-14. See also Research and Statistics Branch, "Recidivism Among Homicide Offenders," *Forum on Corrections Research*, 4, 2 (1992): 7-9.