

Kasandra's Murder Highlights Popular Misconception: Traumatic Brain Injury Does Not Cause Domestic Violence



Earlier this week, Kasandra Perkins was murdered by her partner, Jovan Belcher. Among many biographical facts about Jovan is that he was a linebacker for the Kansas City Chiefs. Indeed, thousands of women are murdered annually in the United States by their intimate partners, implicating all ethnicities, vocations, and socioeconomic levels. We don't know why Jovan Belcher murdered Kasandra Perkins, but many people in the media have speculated as to whether or not a traumatic brain injury (TBI) from successive football-related concussions caused Jovan to murder Kasandra.

A TBI is a traumatically-induced disruption of brain function or disturbance of consciousness, resulting in impairment of cognitive, emotional, and physical functioning. Millions of people in the United States have sustained TBIs, ranging from combat veterans to victims of motor vehicle accidents to football players. TBI symptoms may include problems with impulse control as well as aggressive, and sometimes violent, behavior. TBI-related aggressive behavior can occur anytime and be directed toward anyone. Notably, TBI-related aggression is not confined to intimate partners.

We do not know the details of Kasandra and Jovan's relationship, but we know enough about Jovan to suspect that he might have been emotionally abusive and controlling in his relationships with women, including Kasandra. During college, he punched through a dorm window, nearly severing his thumb and sustaining wrist lacerations, because a woman with whom he was romantically involved, had upset him, according to a University of Maine Police Department incident report. In a separate incident, University Police were contacted by a third party concerned about "raised voices." In that incident, Belcher was upset because a girlfriend had not called him at a designated time. It is rumored that Belcher's fight with Kasandra began when she returned home late from a concert where he suspected she was with other men. Jovan and Kasandra had separated earlier this year and had just gotten back together. The police had been to their residence previously. Kansas City Chiefs' officials knew about the problems in

Jovan and Kasandra's relationship, and the two had been in counseling.

A significant point overlooked in the mainstream media discussion regarding Jovan's murder of Kasandra is that while Belcher may have had a TBI, TBIs do not cause coercive controlling behavior in intimate relationships. It is true that the presence of co-occurring conditions such as TBI, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and substance abuse increases the likelihood of lethality in violent and controlling relationships; however, this is vastly different from drawing a direct causal relationship between TBI and violent controlling behavior in a relationship. Few will disagree that the facts to date detailing the nature of Jovan's murder of Kasandra - shooting her nine times in a fit of violent rage, kissing her corpse, and then committing suicide - is much more strongly associated with battering-related homicides and not TBI.

Glenna Tinney
Military Advocacy Program Coordinator
Battered Women's Justice Project

Photo credit: Bob.Fornal / Foter / CC BY-NC-SA