

Predictors of Domestic Violence Homicide

A batterer's unemployment, access to guns and threats of deadly violence are the strongest predictors of female homicide in abusive relationships, according to a study in this month's issue of the *American Journal of Public Health* (July 2003, Vol. 93, No. 7). "Risk Factors for Femicide in Abusive Relationships: Results From a Multisite Case Control Study" finds that a combination of factors, rather than one single factor, increases the likelihood of intimate partner homicide involving an abusive man who kills his female partner.

Study researchers interviewed family members and other acquaintances of 220 female victims of intimate partner homicide from eleven cities across the country, as well as a control group of 343 women who reported being the victims of physical abuse in the past two years. The researchers - all carefully chosen for their close collaborations with domestic violence advocates as well as knowledge of domestic violence and interview skills - asked questions about the victim and the perpetrator, characteristics of their relationship and details about the abuse including type, frequency and severity of violence.

"In the United States, women are killed by intimate partners more often than by any other type of perpetrator, with the majority of these murders involving prior physical abuse," said Risk Factors for Femicide's lead author, Jacquelyn Campbell, Ph.D., R.N., Anna D. Wolf Endowed Professor at The Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing and Family Violence Prevention Fund board member. "Determining key risk factors, over and above a history of domestic violence, that contribute to the abuse that escalates to murder will help us identify and intervene with battered women who are most at risk."

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Predictors of Intimate Partner Homicide

The "strongest" contextual risk factor for intimate partner homicide is an abuser's lack of employment, finds Risk Factors for Femicide. In fact, unemployment increased the risk of intimate partner homicide fourfold. The study notes that instances in which the abuser had a college education, compared with a high school education, "were protective against femicide."

Other factors that can help predict homicide are an abuser's access to firearms and use of illicit drugs. Access to firearms increased the risk of intimate partner homicide more than five times more than in instances where there were no weapons, according to Risk Factors for Femicide. The findings also "suggest" that abusers who possess guns "tend to inflict the most severe abuse." Illicit drug use also was "strongly associated" with intimate partner homicide, although the abuser's use of alcohol was not, finds the report. In addition, neither a victim's alcohol abuse nor drug use "was independently associated with her risk of being killed."

Risk Factors for Femicide also explores relationship variables that can increase a woman's risk of

becoming a victim of intimate partner homicide. Never having lived with an abusive partner "significantly lowered" a woman's risk of becoming a homicide victim, according to the report. Separating from an abusive partner after having lived with him, leaving the home she shares with an abusive partner or asking her abusive partner to leave the home they share were all factors that put a woman at "higher risk" of becoming a victim of homicide. Having a child in living in the home who was not the abusive partner's biological child also contributed to intimate partner homicide - more than doubling the risk, according the Risk Factors for Femicide.

An abuser's behavior also is a factor in predicting homicide. The risk of homicide "was increased nine-fold by the combination of a highly controlling abuser and the couple's separation after living together," finds Risk Factors for Femicide. An abuser's threats with a weapon or threats to kill his victim also "were associated with substantially higher risks" for her murder. But stalking and threats to harm children or other family members were not "independently associated with" homicide. The study also found that an abuser's previous arrest for domestic violence "actually decreased the risk for femicide." Risk Factors for Femicide concludes that, under certain conditions, "arrest can indeed be protective against domestic violence escalating to lethality."

Preventing Intimate Partner Homicide

According to Campbell, the study suggests that steps such as increasing shelter services for battered women, increasing employment opportunities, and restricting abusers' access to guns can potentially reduce intimate partner homicide.

The study also highlights the critical role health care professionals can play in identifying victims of abuse and helping to increase the safety of battered women who are at increased risk for homicide. "It is important to consider the role medical professionals might play in identifying women at high risk of intimate partner femicide," concludes the study. It encourages health care providers to screen female patients for domestic violence and assess their danger by asking questions about abuse, such as "Does your partner try to control all of your daily activities?" and "Is there a gun in the home?"

"These are all relatively simple questions that can help assess the level of risk," continued Campbell. "In cases of extreme danger, such as a situation where the abuser is highly controlling and the woman is preparing to leave him, it is important for practitioners to warn the woman not to confront the partner with her decision and to alert her of the risk of homicide and the need for shelter."

Campbell also has developed an instrument, the Danger Assessment, to help women assess their own risk of homicide in abusive relationships. The Danger Assessment can be accessed through the Nursing Network on Violence Against Women's web site.