

Women's eNews

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Laci Peterson's Murder Dramatizes Common Danger

By Gretchen Cook, WeNews Correspondent

(WOMENSENEWS) – Scott Peterson's guilty verdict on Friday culminates nearly two years of sensational news coverage, one of the highest-rated TV movies and thousands of Internet postings.

The world was gripped with the idea a man could kill not only the woman he married, but the child he conceived. Unfortunately, that scenario is not so rare.

Murder is, in fact, the No. 1 cause of death among pregnant women, according to a 2001 study published by the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. Usually, the pregnant woman is killed by an intimate partner.

The official crime number cruncher – the FBI – doesn't track those figures nationally. And even if it did, only 17 states even have a pregnancy "box" to check on homicide death certificates.

But the March 2001 study published in JAMA drew on data collected from numerous independent studies. "This enhanced pregnancy mortality surveillance led to the disturbing finding that a pregnant or recently pregnant woman is more likely to be a victim of homicide than to die of any other cause," the study said.

'So Many Women'

That doesn't surprise Josie Slawik. Her pregnant daughter was beaten by the father of her fetus just last year. "I thought she would have learned through me," says the elder Swalik, whose then-husband Tony sent her to the emergency ward with early labor pains after a beating.

As she is witnessing her daughter's situation, the elder Slawik recalls a doctor treating her many years ago saying that he saw "so many women coming in here like this."

In fact, Slawik, 54, says her family's history pregnancy-related violence is like many she hears at the National Domestic Violence Hotline where she now works in Austin, Texas.

The elder Slawik's spouse Tony had been violent when they dated, but her parents had pressured her into marrying him when she told them she was expecting a child. The pregnancy itself, however, only increased the abuse, pitching Tony into irrational jealous rages.

“He said he’d kill me if it turned out to be another man’s child. I was afraid to have the baby because what if he didn’t look like my husband?” says the elder Slawik.

Pregnancy can often trigger jealousy, according to Jackson Katz, a domestic violence educator with Northeastern University in Boston. He says men can also become resentful when the woman’s attention turns to the coming child. And an unwanted child further escalates risk, as the abuser may fear the responsibilities of fatherhood.

Being pregnant made the then- 24-year-old Slawik vulnerable in other ways too.

“It gave him more control knowing that I wasn’t able to go to work,” she says now. “Who was going to hire me when I was pregnant? He knew I couldn’t leave.” She was also so concerned with protecting her womb that she couldn’t deflect punches to the rest of her body or fight back.

The elder Slawik says she stayed with her husband for all the reasons battered women commonly cite: his threats to kill her, his feigned remorse. But the pregnancy added another powerful incentive to stay: Tony, like many abusive fathers, threatened to take her child away. Finally, after three years of battering, the elder Slawik went to the police then divorced him in 1978.

Dangers Escalate in Pregnancy

Jacquelyn Campbell, a family-violence specialist at the Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing in Baltimore, says her research shows expectant mothers are not more at risk for battering and that abusers, in fact, often stop during the pregnancy. Those that don’t stop, however, may increase the intensity of their attacks.

“Those men who become more abusive during pregnancy are particularly dangerous and it is a sign of increased potential for homicide.” Campbell also found those abusers were more likely to own guns.

Campbell argues that doctors should screen all women for signs of abuse during prenatal exams and follow up post-partum for those cases in which the abuse resumes after the child’s birth.

Like many women’s advocacy groups, Campbell does not embrace the only legislative “cure” attempted so far: The Unborn Victims of Violence Act (also know as “Laci and Conner’s Law”).

Signed by President Bush last April, the law allows a pregnant woman’s assailant to be charged with two crimes; one against her, one against the fetus. Abortion rights groups opposed the bill, which was sponsored by Republicans with strong backing from the National Right to Life Committee. Abortion rights advocates warned it was political ploy aimed more at giving a fetus protection from abortion than at preventing domestic violence.

Campbell’s concern is that the law could be used to punish mothers whose drug habits or other behaviors jeopardize the fetus. She’s also skeptical about its effectiveness. “It’s already illegal

for men to beat their wives. It's already illegal for them to kill people. Deterrence is not the issue," she says.

Peterson's jurors will be sequestered at the end of November to decide his punishment. His first-degree murder verdicts for killing his wife and his second-degree murder verdict for killing the fetus she carried, could lead to the death penalty or life without parole.

Gretchen Cook is a Washington D.C.-based writer and radio reporter.

For more information:

Journal of the American Medical Association – “Enhanced Surveillance for Pregnancy-Associated Mortality—Maryland, 1993-1998”: <http://jama.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/abstract/285/11/1455>

Journal of the American Medical Association – “Examining Homicide's Contribution to Pregnancy-Associated Deaths”: <http://jama.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/extract/285/11/1510>

Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing – “Identifying Risk Factors for Femicide in Violent Intimate Relationships”: <http://www.son.jhmi.edu/research/CNR/Homicide/default.htm>

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