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Maternal Homicide: The Unknown Toll

Many New or Expectant Mothers Die Violent Deaths

By Donna St. George, Washington Post Staff Writer

Their killings produced only a few headlines, but across the country in the last decade, hundreds of pregnant women and new mothers have been slain. Even as Scott Peterson's trial became a public fascination, little was said about how often it happens, why, and whether it is a fluke or a social syndrome.

First of three articles

Their deaths passed quietly. Tara Chambers, 29, was gunned down on a June morning inside her North Carolina home. Rebecca Johnson, 16, was shot in the chest as she sat in a pickup truck in Oklahoma. Ana Diaz, 28, was killed in a parking lot in Reston as she stopped to get a friend on their way to work.

They all were pregnant, with futures that seemed sure to unfold over many years. One was a nurse's assistant who planned to name her daughter T'Kaiya. Another had just bought a house. The youngest was a high school cheerleader.

Their killings produced a few local headlines, then faded, each a seeming aberration in the community where it happened.

But pregnant women like them have been slain in Maryland and Mississippi, in California and Kansas, in Ohio and Illinois. Jenny McMechen, 24, was shot in a friend's home in Plainfield, Conn., and Kerry Repp, 29, was shot in her Oregon bedroom, and Tasha Winters, 16, was shot in Indiana the day she told her boyfriend about the baby. Ardena Carter, 24, was found dead in the Georgia woods, and Kathleen Terry, 22, was run over in Idaho, and Melesha Francis, 26, was strangled in New York, and Thelma Jones, 21, was shot sitting on her back steps in Louisiana – the day her mother ordered a cake for her baby shower.

A year-long examination by The Washington Post of death-record data in states across the country documents the killings of 1,367 pregnant women and new mothers since 1990. This is only part of the national toll, because no reliable system is in place to track such cases.

Largely invisible, it is a phenomenon that is as consequential as it is poorly understood. Even in the past two years – as the Laci Peterson homicide case has become a public fascination, with a jury last week recommending that her husband, Scott, be sentenced to death in her killing -- little has been said

about the larger convergence of pregnancy and homicide: how often it happens, why, and whether it is a fluke or a social syndrome.

In the Washington region alone, at least three pregnant women have been killed in the past seven weeks – one in St. Mary’s County, a second in Manassas, a third in Fairfax County. Another pregnant woman was found slain Thursday in Missouri.

Until recently, many of the cases have gone virtually unstudied, uncounted, untracked. Police agencies across the country do not regularly ask about maternal status when they investigate homicides. And health experts have focused historically on the medical complications of pregnancy – embolism, hemorrhage, infection – not on fatal violence.

“It’s very hard to connect the dots when you don’t even see the dots,” said Elaine Alpert, a public health expert at Boston University. “It’s only just starting to be recognized that there is a trend or any commonalities between these deaths.”

The Post’s analysis shows that the killings span racial and ethnic groups. In cases whose details were known, 67 percent of women were killed with firearms. Many women were slain at home – in bedrooms, living rooms, kitchens – usually by men they knew. Husbands. Boyfriends. Lovers.

The cases are not commonplace compared with other homicides but are more frequent than most people know – and have changed the way some experts think about pregnancy.

Five years ago in Maryland, state health researchers Isabelle Horon and Diana Cheng set out to study maternal deaths, using sophisticated methods to spot dozens of overlooked cases in their state. They assumed they would find more deaths from medical complications than the state’s statistics showed. The last thing they expected was murder.

But in their study, published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 2001, they wrote that in Maryland, “a pregnant or recently pregnant woman is more likely to be a victim of homicide than to die of any other cause.”

“It was a huge surprise,” said Horon, who recalls paperwork covering the researchers’ kitchen tables on weekends and evenings as they sought to understand the astonishing numbers. “We thought we had to have made a mistake. We kept checking and checking and rechecking.”

Their findings, as it turned out, were no error. Homicide accounted for 50 of 247 maternal deaths in Maryland over a six-year period – more than 20 percent. It had caused more deaths than cardiovascular disorders, embolisms or accidents.

“People have this misconception that pregnancy is a safe haven,” Cheng said.

Building upon the Maryland study and others, The Post contacted 50 states and the District for all possible data about maternal deaths during pregnancy or postpartum months. Few states track homicides in a comprehensive way, but many states could provide some data, mostly from death certificates. The Post combined what it collected with cases culled from other sources.

The resulting 1,367 maternal homicides took place over 14 years.

“That’s a formidable number – and that’s just the tip,” said Judith McFarlane, who studies violence and pregnancy at Texas Woman’s University and who described the void of reliable numbers as “embarrassing.” She observed: “You can’t address a problem that we don’t document. You can’t reduce them. You can’t prevent them. In essence, they don’t exist.”

In all, 13 states said they had no way of telling how many pregnant and postpartum women had been killed in recent years.

The states included California, where the Peterson case has flashed across television screens and filled newspaper columns since Christmas Eve 2002, when Laci Peterson, eight months pregnant, was reported missing. Her body was discovered in San Francisco Bay in April 2003.

That year, California for the first time changed its death certificate process to include a female victim’s maternity status, but no data are available yet. In the nation’s most populous state, no one can say how many pregnant women like Peterson have been killed.

Three weeks after Peterson disappeared in Modesto, Quinnisha Thomas lost her life in Sacramento, 80 miles away. Eight months pregnant, Thomas, 18, was walking home from a grocery store when her ex-boyfriend shot her in the head execution-style because, prosecutors said, he believed fatherhood would get in the way of his music career. “This was a big, major inconvenience for him,” prosecutor Mark Curry said.

Other states that say they have no way of counting pregnant and postpartum homicides include Arizona, where Melinda Gonzalez, 20, was found dead in a park when she was three months pregnant; and Pennsylvania, where Christina Colon, 24, five months pregnant, was shot and found dead in a quarry.

Cara Krulewitch, a University of Maryland researcher who has studied maternal deaths in the District and Maryland, contended that states are not to blame so much as the lack of a national focus.

The FBI collects comprehensive homicide statistics but does not look at pregnancy. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tracks maternal health but has no uniform way of monitoring maternal killings.

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“The system is flawed,” Krulewitch said.

In Maryland, which keeps track of cases better than most states, slightly more than 10 percent of all homicides among women ages 14 to 44 happened to a pregnant or postpartum woman in the past decade. If that held true nationally, it would suggest about 295 maternal homicides nationwide a year .

Jacquelyn Campbell of Johns Hopkins University said the number of cases has surprised her, even after her many years of research on women's homicides. Although she knew of pregnant homicide victims, she said, "I thought it was a tragedy. I didn't think it was a trend."

Now, she has come to believe: "It's a phenomenon. It probably was always there, but we just didn't know."

The homicides documented by The Post happened in small mountain towns, in tough urban neighborhoods, in quiet suburban subdivisions. The women who died included a college student, a popular waitress, an actress, a church volunteer, a mother of three, a Navy petty officer, an immigrant housekeeper, a businesswoman, a high school athlete, an Army captain, a minister's wife, a Head Start teacher.

More than 100 were teenagers, barely beyond their own girlhoods.

Many already had children – now left behind.

In Tennessee, Kay Briggs found a letter in her mailbox several days after her pregnant daughter was slain in Chesapeake, Va. In it was her daughter's photograph: a beaming Melissa O'Connell, showing off her protruding abdomen. The 33-year-old mother-to-be had mailed it before her husband choked her to death.

"She tried for some time to get pregnant, and it wasn't happening," her mother recalled. "She wanted the baby more than anything."

Clues From 2002

One recent year of homicides – 2002 – was examined in greater detail to get a closer look at how and why the cases happened. For a group of 72 homicides in 24 states, The Post interviewed family members, friends, prosecutors and police. The analysis showed that nearly two-thirds of the cases had a strong relation to pregnancy or involved a domestic-violence clash in which pregnancy may have been a factor.

The dead included Ceeatta Stewart-McKinnie, 23, a college student in Richmond who was beaten to death by her boyfriend. The couple had dated on and off for years, and she had had abortions previously, prosecutors said. This time, he was married – and she refused to end her pregnancy. Turkey hunters found her bludgeoned body in the woods.

In Chicago, Chavanna Prather, 17, was a high school student who played basketball and worked part time at McDonald's. Prather became intimate with her manager at work, then became pregnant and asked for money for an abortion, police said. She was found dead in a river on the city's South Side. He awaits trial.

In Rochester, N.Y., Zaneta Browne, 29, was at odds with her married boyfriend about her pregnancy in 2002 when he shot her with a .22-caliber rifle. The killer and his wife secretly buried her on rural land,

hoping no one would find out. Browne left three children behind. She was nearly four months pregnant with twins.

Louis R. Mizell, who heads a firm that tracks incidents of crime and terrorism, observed that “when husbands or boyfriends attack pregnant partners, it usually has to do with an unwillingness to deal with fatherhood, marriage, child support or public scandal.”

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Young women may be more at risk than others, several statewide studies suggest -- possibly because of more volatile relationships with young men or less money or greater uncertainty about parenthood. Of women whose cases were researched in detail, 16 of 72 were teenage victims – about one in five.

They included Vanessa Youngbear, a 16-year-old cheerleader in Oklahoma who was nearly seven months pregnant when her ex-boyfriend, then 18, blasted her with a shotgun. Witnesses said the boyfriend had not wanted to pay child support and had worried that he might face charges of statutory rape if authorities found out he had impregnated a minor.

In Nevada, Monalisa Nava was just 14 when she was gunned down – the same age as the ex-boyfriend who allegedly killed her. Nava was happily pregnant, her mother said, but unwilling to move with her boyfriend to Mexico, as he wanted. Police and family members say he shot her in front of her younger brothers as her mother dialed 911, and he has been on the run ever since.

At any age, “pregnancy is a huge, life-altering event for both the male and the female,” said Pat Brown, a criminal profiler based in Minneapolis. “It is certainly a more dangerous moment in life. You are escalating people’s responsibilities and curtailing their freedoms.”

For some men, she said, the situation boils down to one set of unadorned facts: “If the woman doesn’t want the baby, she can get an abortion. If the guy doesn’t want it, he can’t do a damn thing about it. He is stuck with a child for the rest of his life, he is stuck with child support for the rest of his life, and he’s stuck with that woman for the rest of his life. If she goes away, the problem goes away.”

In New Jersey, the trouble was not over whether to give birth but how to raise the twins that Marlyn Hassan, 29, a bank manager, was expecting. Her husband insisted that she convert to Islam before the babies were born. She was Hindu and “wanted her children to know both religions,” her cousin said. He stabbed her to death in their home, then killed her sister and mother.

In Maryland, Kennis Falconer, 26, of Takoma Park was living with her fiance, by whom she was seven months pregnant, when his other girlfriend, posing as a cosmetics saleswoman, came into her apartment and stabbed her. The deadly love triangle was intensified by the pregnancy, prosecutors said. Falconer’s fiance had decided to stay with her, and the couple had bought a home together a short time earlier.

In California, Raye Rapoza, 34, was nearly eight months pregnant when her husband drove the family’s minivan off a 150-foot sea cliff. Prosecutors say he had a history of marital abuse and was fixated on whether the baby was his. Perhaps most of all, “his wife had talked about leaving him, and

he wasn't going to let that happen," said Jim Fox, San Mateo County district attorney. The crash killed Rapoza and her 4-year-old daughter. Her husband survived and is awaiting trial.

Although maternal homicide is only recently drawing notice, considerable research has been done on battering of pregnant women. Studies go back 20 years, and many experts have come to agree that 4 percent to 8 percent of pregnant women – 160,000 to 320,000 a year – are physically hurt by husbands, boyfriends or partners.

Research shows that for more than 70 percent of abused women, pregnancy does little to change the status quo. For a smaller group, pregnancy brings a peaceful period, when abuse stops. But that is mostly offset by a third group: the 27 percent for whom domestic abuse starts during pregnancy.

Some experts conclude that pregnancy is more "protective" than dangerous, but McFarlane, of Texas Woman's University, maintains that it goes both ways. "It can be a protective time for an abused woman, but it also can be a very vulnerable time," she said, recounting stories of women who were afraid to even tell a husband or boyfriend they were pregnant.

Many women endure hitting and shoving in pregnancy – or choking and threats to kill – because they want their child to have a father, or because they feel financially dependent or too vulnerable to break away. Some believe a baby will ease the tension.

The analysis of 72 deaths in 2002 shows that nearly 30 percent were caused by violence that did not seem related to childbearing: drug dealing, robberies, errant gunfire.

A total of 15 cases started with a missing-person report – and ended with a body discovered in a remote field or woods. Near Huron, N.Y., a body was found, with no missing-person report. The woman had been seven months pregnant.

As analyst Mizell said, "You have to wonder how many missing-person cases happened because she was pregnant."

The Killers

Tammy Baker, 24, was a well-liked bookkeeper who lived in an apartment in Louisa, Va., 30 miles east of Charlottesville, when she met Coleman "Mike" Johnson Jr., a contractor on a repair job at a nearby nuclear power plant.

The two hit it off for a time, then parted ways. One day, Baker called him to say she was pregnant and intended to have the baby. They argued repeatedly by phone, recalls Tracey Ryder, a friend of Baker's. He did not want a baby, nor did he want any child support obligations. But Baker did not change her mind.

By the time Baker was eight months pregnant, she had chosen a name, Savannah, and decorated a room for the baby girl she was expecting; she worked two jobs to save money.

But the conflict with Johnson never went away. On Dec. 3, 1997, Baker stooped down for what looked like a mislaid garbage can lid outside her apartment door.

Beneath the lid were two pipe bombs.

Baker was killed instantly in the explosion, which literally shook the earth in Louisa, and people in the small town found it hard to imagine. Who would kill a pregnant woman?

“He did it for money,” said Assistant U.S. Attorney Tom Bondurant. “He didn’t want to pay child support.”

As in other cases, Johnson at first denied it was his child, then pressed for an abortion, then plotted murder.

“It seems to me that these guys hope against hope for a miscarriage or an abortion, but when everything else fails, they take the life of the woman to avoid having the baby,” said Jack Levin of Northeastern University.

Ashley Lyons, 18, faced a similar horror in a park near her old high school in Kentucky early this year – on the day she went to her doctor for an ultrasound and learned she would be having a boy. She was 22 weeks along.

She had already picked out a name, Landon, and created a baby journal. As one entry gave way to another, she confided her ex-boyfriend’s opposition to the pregnancy. Still, she wrote: “You are the child I have always dreamed about. . . . I know it will be a long time before I meet you, but I can’t wait to hold you for the first time.”

Excited by the ultrasound Jan. 7, Lyons made plans to show the fetal pictures to her ex-boyfriend, Roger McBeath Jr., 22. She left her family’s home, telling her mother she would be back for dinner. But when her father and brother found her, she was sitting in her parked car – with the car engine running and the headlights on.

She had been shot twice in the head and once in the neck. In her lap was her handbag – half opened – with the ultrasound picture inside, her father said.

“He knew that if she had that baby that she would be in his life forever, and he didn’t want that,” said prosecutor Shawna Jewell.

On a cold Kentucky afternoon four days later, Lyons was buried with her tiny baby tucked into her arms.

Staff writer David S. Fallis and staff researcher Bobbye Pratt contributed to this report.

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