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NICOLE E. ALEXANDER-SCOTT, MD, MPH
DIRECTOR, RHODE ISLAND DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
EDITED BY SAMARA VINER-BROWN, MS

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Characteristics of Victims and Suspects in Domestic Violence-Related Homicide – Rhode Island Violent Death Reporting System, 2004–2015

YONGWEN JIANG, PhD; DEBORAH DEBARE, MMHS; IAN COLOMER, BA; JOHN WESLEY, JD; JORDAN SEABERRY, BFA; SAMARA VINER-BROWN, MS

Domestic violence is a critical public health issue.[1] It displays a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is perpetrated by one intimate person to gain or maintain power and control against another person.[2] Domestic violence includes physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that intimidate the other.[2] Rhode Island's criminal definition of domestic violence (§12-29-2) includes homicides when committed by one family or household member against another.[3] In Rhode Island, child abuse (parent/guardian vs. child) cases are not considered domestic violence, unless some sort of intimate partner relationship appears evident. However, many elder abuse cases would be considered domestic violence cases because they involve adult parties related by blood or marriage, or adult parties that live together (or resided together within the past three years).

Domestic violence arrest statistics collected by the Rhode Island Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training and Monitoring Unit shows over 5,000 domestic violence arrests annually in Rhode Island, and that domestic violence occurs in every city/town.[4] Analyzing domestic violence data is key for the practice of domestic violence prevention, and for assisting practitioners in focusing on the highest risk factors. Data from the Rhode Island Violent Death Reporting System (RIVDRS) can better understand the vulnerabilities of victims, the characteristics of suspects, and the multiple types of motivations related to those domestic violence homicide deaths. We utilized RIVDRS data to investigate the characteristics of victims and suspects to provide insight into the nature of these domestic violent homicides.

METHODS

The National Violent Death Reporting System is an incident-based active surveillance system funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and implemented by states and territorial health departments.[5-7] A total of 40 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico currently participate in the NVDRS.[5] The system is unique and gathers information from multiple sources including coroner/medical examiner records, death certificates, law enforcement reports, and crime laboratories.[5-7] It can provide states with a comprehensive picture of who, when, where, and factors that contribute to violent deaths.[5-7]

RIVDRS data collection began in 2004. Assembling all occurrent fatal injuries is useful to design and evaluate prevention efforts.[7] RIVDRS collects occurrent violent deaths, which means the initial injury must have occurred in Rhode Island.[7] Domestic violence-related deaths were defined as those involving family or household member homicides, other deaths associated with domestic violence or jealousy, including decedents who were not the family or household member. We manually reviewed the medical examiner and law enforcement narratives of 354 homicides during 2004-2015 to determine true cases. This study includes 2004–2015 RIVDRS data (all available years). All analyses were performed using the SAS (Version 9.4, SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC).

RESULTS

From 2004 through 2015, a total of 90 homicides were captured by RIVDRS. Among the 83 incidents, 77 involved one homicide death, 5 had double homicide victims, 1 had three homicide decedents, and 14 were homicide(s)-suicide incidents (data not shown).

Homicide victims ranged in age from 18 to 93 years and almost half of the victims were 25–44 years old. The majority were females. Over half (58%) were non-Hispanic white, 15.9% were non-Hispanic black, and 22.7% were Hispanic. It should be noted that blacks only account for 4.7% of the RI adult population and those of Hispanic ethnicity represent 12.1% of the state adult population based on 2015 BRFSS data. About 43% were never married or single. Most of the victims were injured at their home. Firearms were used in 32.2% of cases, followed by sharp instruments (28.7%) (**Table 1**). Over one-third of decedents tested positive for alcohol, 14.1% for opiates, and 12.9% for antidepressants (**Table 2**). Approximately six in ten victims experienced intimate partner violence; over a quarter had an argument which preceded the victim's death; and over 18% were associated with jealousy (**Table 3**).

Homicide suspects ranged in age from 18 to 90 years (data not shown). Among the homicide suspects, over half were aged 25–44 years; the majority were males, and 58.4% were non-Hispanic white, 20.8% non-Hispanic black, and 16.9% Hispanic. The victim's relationship to the suspect was most often that of wife/ex-wife/girlfriend/ex-girlfriend, and parent/in-law. Over one-third of the suspects had attempted suicide (**Table 4**).

Table 1. Characteristics of domestic violence homicide victims in Rhode Island, 2004-2015 (N=90)

CHARACTERISTIC	n	%
Age group (mean: 43.7 years)		
18-24 years	15	16.7
25-44 years	39	43.3
45-64 years	23	25.6
65 years and older	13	14.4
Sex		
Male	27	30.0
Female	63	70.0
Race/Ethnicity		
White, non-Hispanic	51	58.0
Black, non-Hispanic	14	15.9
Hispanic	20	22.7
Other	N/A	N/A
Marital status		
Never married/Single, not otherwise specified	39	43.3
Married/Civil union/Domestic partnership	31	34.4
Divorced/Married, but separated	14	15.6
Widowed	6	6.7
City/Town of residence		
Urban (core-cities)[a]	40	44.4
Sub-urban regions	41	45.6
Non-metro/Rural areas	6	6.7
Out of state	N/A	N/A
Injury location		
House or apartment	83	92.2
Other	7	7.8
Injured at victim home		
Yes	68	76.4
No	21	23.6
Means/Weapon Used		
Firearm	28	32.2
Handgun	21	—
Shotgun and rifle	5	—
Sharp instrument	25	28.7
Blunt instrument	11	12.6
Hanging, strangulation, suffocation	10	11.5
Personal weapons (hands, feet, fists)	10	11.5
Other	N/A	N/A

Data are not presented for cells containing fewer than five cases. N/A, not available.

[a] Core-cities: Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence and Woonsocket.

Table 2. Positive toxicology tests of domestic violence homicide victims, Rhode Island 2004-2015 (N=90)[a]

Toxicology test	n	%
Tested	87	96.7
Toxicology test positive		
Any toxicology[b]	52	59.8
Alcohol or any illicit substance[c]	47	54.0
Alcohol	31	36.1
BAC>=0.08 g/dl	19	—
BAC<0.08 g/dl	12	—
Opiate	12	14.1
Antidepressant	11	12.9
Marijuana	10	11.9
Cocaine	7	8.1

Data are not presented for cells containing fewer than five cases.

BAC: blood alcohol concentration, BAC>=0.08 g/dl used as the standard for intoxication.

[a] Subcategories do not sum to 100% because test results of victims can be positive for alcohol or multi-drugs.

[b] The toxicology module collects information about 12 drug classes including alcohol, amphetamines, anticonvulsants, antidepressants, antipsychotics, barbiturates, benzodiazepines, carbon monoxide, cocaine, marijuana, muscle relaxants, and opiates.

[c] Alcohol or any illicit substance includes alcohol, cocaine, marijuana, or opiate.

Table 3. Circumstances of domestic violence homicide victims, Rhode Island 2004-2015 (N=90)[a]

Precipitating circumstance	n	%
Total homicides with precipitating circumstances	80	90.9
Interpersonal		
Intimate partner violence	53	60.2
Jealousy	16	18.2
Other relationship problem (nonintimate)	6	6.8
Victim of interpersonal violence within past month	5	5.7
Life stressor		
Argument or conflict between the decedent and suspect	25	28.4
Physical fight (two people, not a brawl)	5	5.7
Homicide event		
Caretaker abuse/neglect led to death	5	5.7

Data are not presented for cells containing fewer than five cases.

[a] Sums of percentages in columns exceed 100% because a homicide could have had more than one precipitating circumstance.

Table 4. Characteristics of domestic violence homicide suspects in Rhode Island, 2004-2015 (N=81)

CHARACTERISTIC	n	%
Age group (mean: 38.4 years)		
18-24 years	12	15.4
25-44 years	42	53.9
45-64 years	20	25.6
65+ years	4	5.1
Sex		
Male	68	85.0
Female	12	15.0
Race/Ethnicity		
White, non-Hispanic	45	58.4
Black, non-Hispanic	16	20.8
Hispanic	13	16.9
Other	3	3.9
Relationship of victim to suspect		
Wife/ex-wife/girlfriend/ex-girlfriend	46	51.1
Husband/boyfriend/ex-boyfriend	11	12.2
Parent/in-law	14	15.6
Roommate	6	6.7
Bystander[a]	9	10.0
Other related by blood	N/A	N/A
Abuse history		
Yes	11	19.0
No	47	81.0
Care giver		
Yes	7	11.9
No	52	88.1
Suspect is also victim		
Yes	13	16.1
No	68	84.0
Suspect is mentally ill		
Yes	5	16.7
No	25	83.3
Attempted suicide		
Yes	19	33.9
No	37	66.1

Data are not presented for cells containing fewer than five cases. N/A, not available.

[a] "Bystander" includes "boyfriend of suspect's ex-girlfriend", "boyfriend of suspect's wife", "ex-boyfriend of suspect's girlfriend", "boyfriend of suspect's aunt", "friend of suspect's ex-girlfriend", "friend of suspect's girlfriend", and "landlord of suspect's ex-roommate".

DISCUSSION

Our findings show that domestic violence-related homicides disproportionately affect women (70%), and intimate partner violence accounts for over 60% of domestic violence homicides. In 2015, women in Alaska had the highest rate of dying by intimate partner homicide (2.86 per 100,000 women), followed by Nevada (2.29), Louisiana (2.22), Tennessee (2.10), and South Carolina (1.83).[8] The intimate partner homicide rate was 1.47 per 100,000 women in RI and ranked 12th.[8] By race/ethnicity, the age-adjusted homicide rate among non-Hispanic white was 1.5 per 100,000 women; non-Hispanic black women had the highest rate (4.4 per 100,000), and Hispanic was 1.8.[6]

It is critical to increase supervision and services among high-risk domestic violence incidents.[4] To identify and intervene with battered women at risk is a major strategy to decrease intimate partner homicide.[9] The Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence (RICADV) seeks to engage men through its Ten Men Project, as an additional strategy to prevent intimate partner violence.[1] In order to better protect victims in domestic violence cases, programs such as the Critical Case Review Team specialized Domestic Violence Probation, the Domestic Violence Court Advocacy program and the Law Enforcement Advocate program should be strengthened. The RI Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training and Monitoring Unit collects domestic violence reports and arrests.[3] RICADV has an agreement with the Unit and has access to those data. The RICADV database has more information about restraining orders and the sentences of suspects since they track each case. These are important relationships to evaluate and improve statewide prevention services. We plan to abstract more information from the RICADV database in the future.

Firearms have been found to be associated with an increased risk of domestic violence.[4] A national analysis of mass shootings in the U.S. between 2009 and 2016 found that 54% were related to domestic or family violence.[10] Access to firearms make domestic violence incidents escalate faster, and turn more dangerous and more lethal.[9] Our results identified that almost 66.7% of the incidents with multiple homicide victims involved guns, and 78% of the bystanders died due to firearms. A new state statute enacted in September 2017 limits persons with domestic violence restraining orders, or defendants who have been convicted of misdemeanor domestic violence cases, to have access to firearms.[11]

There were several challenges: (1) Not all homicide incidents include suspects (i.e., three incidents had no suspect; and one had two suspects). (2) Suspect information is underreported, such as "is suspect mentally ill" (51 missing of 81). (3) The law defines domestic violence as including "cohabitants" (roommates). However, homicides among roommates have very different types of motives than those that occur among boyfriend/girlfriends. (4) Domestic violence homicides were underestimated since RIVDRS staff do not have

access to incidents that occurred in Rhode Island, but died in other states. (5) Domestic violence can have fatal outcomes like homicide or suicide. Over one-third of suspects had an attempted suicide. We did not include suicide. (6) Substance abuse and alcohol use are related to greater domestic violence risk. We do not have toxicology test results for suspects. In homicide(s)-suicide incidents, since suspects committed suicides, we have more information for suspects. However, only 14 were homicide(s)-suicide incidents among 83 incidents.

Although there are some limitations, RIVDRS is statewide database, combines multiple sources, and can provide accurate and comprehensive surveillance data. The majority of domestic violent homicides (91%) have circumstance information. The RIVDRS data include not only victim, but also suspect information. While the majority of domestic violence studies only include intimate partner violence, this study also includes 17 family member homicide incidents. RIVDRS data can be utilized to inform interventions and guide violence prevention. Targeting at-risk populations and restricting abusers' access to guns can potentially reduce domestic violence homicide deaths.[9]

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Acknowledgments

Authors

Yongwen Jiang, PhD, is Senior Public Health Epidemiologist in the Center for Health Data and Analysis at the Rhode Island Department of Health, and Assistant Professor of the Practice of Epidemiology, School of Public Health, Brown University.

Deborah DeBare, MMHS, is the Executive Director of the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

Ian Colomer, BA, is Policy Associate of the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

John Wesley, JD, is the Director of Policy and Advocacy at the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

Jordan Seaberry, BFA, is the Director of Public Policy and Advocacy at the Institute for the Study and Practice of Nonviolence.

Samara Viner-Brown, MS, is the Chief of the Center for Health Data and Analysis at the Rhode Island Department of Health.

Correspondence

Yongwen Jiang
Yongwen_Jiang@brown.edu