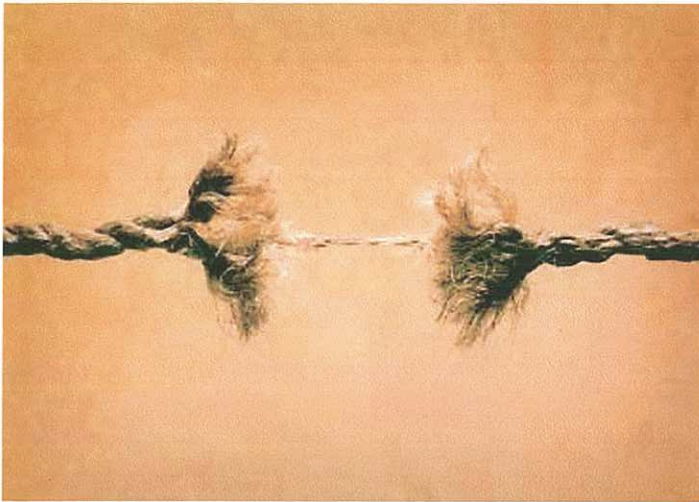


National Institute of Justice Panel Explores Familicide Phenomenon

By Office of Community Oriented Policing Services

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The stresses of an economic downturn often lead to increases in domestic violence, and the current recession is no exception. Since October 2008, there has been a spike in familicides, or cases where a husband murders his entire family and commits suicide. The horrific nature of such crimes tends to generate a great deal of media attention and speculation about motives and reasons behind these acts. While it may be easy to blame the economy, underlying family problems often could be the key. On June 2, 2009, the National Institute of Justice convened a panel of experts to discuss research findings and possible ways to prevent future familicides from occurring. The panelists were Dr. David Adams, author of *Why Do They Kill? Men Who Murder Their Intimate Partners*; Dr. Jacquelyn C. Campbell, Anna D. Wolf Chair and Professor, Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing; and Dr. Richard Gelles, Professor and Dean, School of Public Policy and Practice, University of Pennsylvania.

Risk Factors

Fortunately, familicide is a rare, isolated event. Unfortunately, this rarity makes finding trends difficult. The biggest risk factor for familicide to occur is a prior history of domestic violence. This has been the situation in 70 percent of cases in a 12-city study by Dr. Campbell. Seventy-eight percent of the perpetrators in a survey by Dr. Adams fit the “Possessively Jealous” archetype and 30 percent fit the “Depressed/Suicidal” archetype. Some of these men do not fit any stereotype associated with abusers and do not have histories or records. In most instances, there is a gradual buildup of tensions and conflicts after which one event may lead the man to action—either a sense of a loss of control over finances, unemployment, or, more frequently, when the wife announces that she is leaving. In other instances, however, threats of violence become more frequent and more specific over time until the man acts on his threats.

The panelists agreed that access to a gun is another major risk factor in familicide. It is easier to be impulsive when a gun is nearby. The same gun that may have been used to threaten an intimate partner previously can be used to kill that intimate partner. According to Dr. Adams, 92 percent of 591 murder-suicide cases examined in a study were committed with a gun. Furthermore, states with least restrictive gun control laws have as much as eight times the rate of murder-suicides as those with the most restrictive gun control laws.

Prevention Strategies

Again, the relative rarity and specificity of familicide mean that simple blanket strategies will not prevent these tragedies from occurring; however, the panelists identified actions that may mitigate risks.

Greater collaboration between police and social welfare agencies, such as child welfare, suicide prevention, or substance abuse treatment, could reduce frequency of familicides. Since social welfare agencies do not generally have access to arrest records, they may not know if there are other risk factors to check into or follow up on. Eighty-three percent of the victims and perpetrators in homicide-suicides were known in some system prior to that crime. Suicide-prevention groups can make sure to ask people who are in treatment about intimate partner relationships and identify possible familicide risks. The U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Violence against Women increases collaboration between these agencies through family justice centers, but so far their impact is limited to a few locations.

More important is building a sense of bystander responsibility and increasing community accountability. Many people are not sure what questions to ask or to whom to report something if they suspect domestic abuse. Here, a public information campaign could be beneficial in educating a community. Women, especially, need to know where and how they can obtain assistance in dealing with an abusive partner, including reporting abuse so that partners are flagged for treatment and strategies are established for ending the relationship. A woman leaving her husband can trigger violence, including familicide, so social welfare, police agencies, and the woman herself should be informed about how she can more safely leave an abusive situation.

As the economy tightens, funding for social services may decrease and specialized domestic services could get harder to find. Community policing and involvement become even more important. Increasing rapport with victims will increase the likelihood that they will seek help in future.

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