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CORRECTIONAL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT
RECHERCHE ET DÉVELOPPEMENT CORRECTIONNELS

Research Brief

A Profile of Homicide Offenders in Canada

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Canada

Research Brief

A Profile of Homicide Offenders in Canada

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A Profile of Homicide Offenders in Canada

Research Division
Correctional Research and Development
Correctional Service of Canada

1995

While criminal homicides account for less than one-half of one percent of all violent crimes reported each year,[1] homicidal violence receives extensive media coverage both as news and entertainment. The "life-threatening risk" that a homicide offender can pose seems to capture human interest.

Criminal homicide is causing the death of another person without legal justification or excuse. It includes first- and second-degree murder, manslaughter, and infanticide.[2]

Popular explanations for homicidal behavior often focus on certain personalities or dispositions. However, offenders often cite personal reasons (such as arguments or quarrels) and the commission of another offense (such as sexual assault for female victims and robbery for elderly victims) as the main reasons for taking the life of another person.

Some basic statistics...

We know that homicide, like other violent crimes, is most often an offense of the young male.[3] In Canada, roughly nine of every 10 persons accused of homicide is male and about three-quarters of those accused are younger than 35. Approximately 8% of those accused of homicide are young offenders.

Although homicides account for a very small proportion of all violent crimes, it is still a crime that is closely monitored for trends. Notably, the 1994 homicide rate of 2.04 incidents per 100,000 persons was the lowest recorded in 25 years. In addition, the 596 homicides reported in 1994 represents the third consecutive year-to-year decrease (from 753 in 1991, to 732 in 1992, to 630 in 1993).[4]

Homicide has a high probability of being committed by someone known to the victim and is more likely to happen in a private residence (quite often the victim's) than in a public place. Males are twice as likely to be homicide victims than females.[5]

More important, homicides involving women have different dynamics than those between men.[6] First and foremost, women are most often killed by men -- particularly older men who are either a family member, spouse or ex-partner. Similarly, women who commit homicide usually kill a family member (often their husbands, ex-husbands or lovers) and there is usually a documented history of abuse. Men are also most often killed by men, but by younger men than are women. Men accused of homicide also tend to be single, whereas women are more likely to be married.[7]

Homicide offenders are likely to use weapons. In fact, about one-third of all homicides involve the use of a firearm (such as handguns, rifles or shotguns) and at least another quarter involve the use of other offensive weapons (such as knives).[8]

The longitudinal court outcomes of individuals accused of homicide (reported in 1988) show how seriously Canadians regard homicide. Of those accused, more than 94% are sent to trial (85% on the original charge) and three-quarters of those processed in adult court are eventually convicted (10% for first-degree murder; 24% for second-degree murder; 40% for manslaughter and less than one percent for infanticide).[9]

For every five individual's originally charged with first-degree murder, only one is convicted of this homicide offense (others have the charge reduced to second-degree murder or manslaughter). [10] Of those convicted of homicide in adult court, 45% receive life sentences, slightly more than one-third receive from two to 10 years and about one in 10 receive custodial sentences of less than two years. As such, nine in 10 homicide offenders receive sentences to be served in a federal penitentiary (the remainder serve their sentences in a provincial facility). Finally, a December 31, 1994 snapshot of the federal offender population identified almost one-fifth of this population as homicide offenders (15% of this group had been convicted of first-degree murder, 55% of second degree murder and 30% of manslaughter).[11]

Initial research...

A useful way of classifying homicide is to focus on the motivation for these offences. Some researchers have suggested looking at the origin of lethal violence, motive, to see if offences are: "expressive," "instrumental" or "gang-related-related" homicides.[12]

(A) "Expressive" homicide

"Expressive homicide usually starts with an argument and the primary goal is to hurt the person. These "expressive" homicides can be further subdivided into those which occur between spouses, between other family members, as a result of child abuse and between strangers. [13]

i) Spousal homicides

During 1994, one in six solved homicides was a spousal (includes registered marriages, common-law relationships and persons separated/divorced) homicide, with women accounting for three-quarters of the victims.[14] Spousal killings are likely to occur between legally married couples, at all stages of the relationship and across all social and economic boundaries. Spousal killers are also likely to be unemployed at the time of the offense, which is consistent with research indicating that domestic violence is likely to escalate in stressful situations. While alcohol is often consumed at the time of spousal killings, research on domestic homicide suggests that fatal attacks on spouses occur irrespective of sobriety or level of intoxication. Finally, the main

precipitating circumstances leading to spousal homicide include a history of marital violence, separation, jealousy/sexual exclusivity and child custody.[15]

ii) Parental homicides

For the most part, offenders who kill their parents have themselves been subjected to various forms of abuse (physical, sexual and emotional) at the hands of a parent (usually the father of the offender) or have witnessed the abuse of others in the family. Not surprisingly, a history of psychological disturbance is also common among these offenders.[16]

iii) Sibling homicides

While the incidence of violence between siblings is high, fatal sibling violence is extremely rare. When it does occur, the siblings are most often adults, brothers and it is usually after an argument during which alcohol had been consumed.[17]

iv) Child homicides

Statistically, the age of greatest risk of being a homicide victim is during the first year of life (5% of all solved homicides in 1994).[18]

Children who are killed before their first birthday (called infanticide) are most often killed by a family member, usually by their parent (about three-quarters of such victims)

and are equally at risk from their father and mother. A very small number of these children are killed by acquaintances (such as baby-sitters or friends) and an even smaller number are killed by strangers.

When women kill a child, they almost invariably kill their own, whereas men do kill children they have not fathered. These women are likely to be young, unlikely to have a prior criminal record and likely to have received mental health treatment in the past. This last finding may be simply an artifact of women being more likely than men to seek out such services when experiencing difficulties. Men who commit child homicide, on the other hand, are likely to be older and have a criminal record.[19]

(B) <u>"Instrumental" homicide</u>

An "instrumental" homicide begins with attempting to get something from another person; violence is simply an acquisition tool. In Canada, about one in four 1994 homicide incidents occurred during the commission of another offense. Further, more than two-thirds of these homicides happened at the same time as another violent offense.[20]

i) Homicide in the context of theft/assault/robbery

A substantial proportion of homicide incidents occur during a theft, assault or robbery. These incidents are almost always committed by males, who frequently act in groups and are usually young (teens or early twenties). There are usually just single victims of these incidents, who are strangers and are killed in the open (such as the street). Money, property and/or drugs are usually the main objective of these incidents. [21]

When robbery homicides happen in a private residence, the victim and offender are more likely to know one another.

ii) Homicide in the context of sexual assault

In 1994, there were 21 reported homicide incidents that were connected to a sexual assault. Such incidents are always committed by males, who are often young and who usually act alone against female victims who are either complete strangers or casually acquainted with the offender. Psychiatric disturbance is often not obvious and the offenders have no history of past sex assault convictions. The nature of sex murders (brutal, sudden and unprovoked) and the helplessness of their victims combine to make this type of homicide one of the most disturbing violent crimes.[22]

iii) Homicide in the context of evading apprehension by peace officers

A number of homicide incidents occur during the course of intervention to prevent crime or apprehend an offender. In 1994, one police officer was the victim of homicide while on duty. However, over the past ten years, no correctional worker (federal or provincial) was the victim of homicide while on duty. Descriptive information on the characteristics of such homicide offenders is lacking in this and other jurisdictions. [23]

C) "Gang-related" homicide

While "gang-related" homicide may possess features of both "expressive" and "instrumental" violence, it is motivated more by membership in the gang than anything else. [24] Possible motives for gang-related homicides include: representing (the offense results from a signaling of gang identity or alliance by hand signs, language or clothing); recruitment; intimidation (of a victim or witness); turf violation; prestige (to glorify the gang or gain rank within the gang); personal conflict (within gang); extortion (efforts to compel membership in the gang or exact payment from local business or independent drug dealers within the gang's territory); vice (usually distribution of drugs by gang members); and retaliation.

Other features...

In 1988, the Correctional Service of Canada conducted a national survey to estimate the prevalence, nature and severity of mental health problems among the federal male institutional population.[25] Comparing the lifetime prevalence rates of mental disorders across major offense groupings (such as homicide, robbery, sex and drugs) revealed that the likelihood of having met the criteria for Antisocial Personality Disorder was second highest (after robbery offenders) among homicide offenders (almost seven in 10 met the criteria).

The basic features of Antisocial Personality Disorder are a record of continuous antisocial behavior through which the rights of others are violated, continuance into adult life of a pattern of antisocial behavior begun before the age of 15 (such as aggressive sexual behavior, excessive drinking and use of illicit drugs), and failure to sustain good job performance over a period of several years.

The more heinous aspects of Antisocial Personality Disorder may, however, lessen after age 30 -- particularly sexual promiscuity, fighting, criminality and vagrancy. This is promising given that homicide offenders under federal supervision, as a group, seem to be aging. On December 31, 1994, the average age of homicide offenders at admission was 36 and of those under federal jurisdiction was 42.[26]

Homicide offenders, as a group, were also characterized by a relatively high lifetime prevalence of alcohol disorder. At least two-thirds of these homicide offenders had such a disorder. More recent data indicates that one half of homicide offenders reported that they were under the influence of alcohol, drugs or both on the day they committed the offense(s).

Conclusion...

Homicide offenders have several key characteristics. First and foremost, homicide offenders are distinguished by motive which can be "expressive," "instrumental" or "gang-related." Second, homicide offenders hold attitudes, values and beliefs favorable to the use of lethal and/or non-lethal violence. Third, alcohol and/or drug abuse is a common characteristic of homicide offenders.

Promising prevention and rehabilitation targets for homicide offenders are, therefore, changing attitudes, values and beliefs that are supportive of violence; learning self-control; reducing anger and hostility; curbing impulses; and removing chemical dependencies.

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