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## Intimate Partner Homicide: An Overview

*by Margaret A. Zahn*

### **About the Author**

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Intimate partner homicide—the killing of a spouse, ex-spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend—has declined significantly in the past 25 years. The decline in these homicides took place among all race and gender groups, although they were greater for men and for blacks and less pronounced for white women.<sup>1</sup> These declines, while truly significant, mask the important fact that women are substantially more likely than men to be murdered by their intimate partners. The findings presented in the accompanying articles examine which women are most at risk for being a murder victim and consider policies that may help to explain the declines or to result in further declines.

In assessing risk, Carolyn Rebecca Block found three key risk factors in violence against women that predict a lethal outcome. They are the type of past violence (previous choking is a significant risk factor), recency of attack, and frequency of violence. Women who have recently been severely attacked are more likely to be murdered. Phyllis Sharps and her colleagues found strong correlations between partner alcohol and substance abuse and the killing of women by their intimate partners. Men who murdered their partners were more likely to be drunk every day or to use drugs than those who abused but did not murder or than those who did not abuse their partners. Further, Jacquelyn C. Campbell and her colleagues demonstrate the usefulness of risk assessment instruments in predicting eventual murder. They also found drug use, serious alcohol abuse, and gun possession to be highly associated with the murder of women by their intimate partners.

In terms of policies and practices that might explain the reduction in intimate partner homicides, Laura Dugan and her colleagues focus on exposure reduction strategies—that is, strategies that shorten the time that couples are in contact with each other. The results are mixed. The impacts of some criminal justice policies vary by race, gender, and marital status, with unmarried partners

often being negatively affected by the policies and married partners helped by them. However, none of the policies examined address the use of drugs or alcohol or the removal of guns from domestic violence situations—all significant predictors of lethal violence.

Neil Websdale recommends the use of fatality reviews as a way to assess where our criminal justice and social services systems fail in preventing homicides. Although the focus of his article is on the utility of these reviews in protecting women against homicide, the same technique could be used to review the deaths of men who are murdered (the largest category of homicide victims). Certainly the viability of these reviews to help reduce or prevent all forms of homicide—not just those committed by intimate partners—should be explored.

In general, these articles lead us forward in determining the risk factors for the murder of women. They also examine the social policies and practices that might be associated with additional preventive measures. Taken together, the articles demonstrate the disconnect between our social policies and the risk factors associated with intimate partner homicide. For example, although alcohol abuse is a clear risk factor, few social policies aimed at reducing intimate partner homicide have focused on it. We must do a better job of linking social policy and practice to identified risk predictors if this social problem is to be resolved. The extent to which victim services and criminal justice systems focus on these factors could lead to a reduction, not only of intimate partner homicide, but of other homicides as well.

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## Notes

1. Fox, James Alan, and Marianne W. Zawitz, *Homicide Trends in the United States*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, January 1999: 2 (NCJ 173956). Available at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/homtrnd.htm>.

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