



Pathology Biology Section – 2010

G18 Analysis of Female Firearm Homicides in King County, Washington 2000 - 2007

Janaki Warushahennadi, MD*, and Richard C. Harruff, PhD, King County Medical Examiner's Office, 325 Ninth Avenue, HMC Box 359792, Seattle, WA 98116

After attending this presentation, attendees will be able to describe distinctive features of female homicides due to firearm injuries.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by delineating the demographics, modalities, circumstances, and motivations that characterize female homicides.

Materials and Methods: The records of the King County Medical Examiner's Office (KCMEO) in Seattle, Washington, were searched to locate homicide victims from 2000 through 2007. These records were analyzed with respect to demographics and cause of death to compare male and female homicide victims. Those cases in which the decedent was female and the cause of death was firearm injury were analyzed in more detail and were used to construct a database comprising essential medical examiner information. Investigative records from the Homicide Investigation Tracking System (HITS) of the Washington Attorney General's Office were incorporated into this same database to include details regarding the victim, circumstances, and perpetrator of her death. Analysis of this database was the basis of the results of this study.

Results: From 2000 through 2007, there were a total of 618 homicides investigated by KCMEO; 490 were male and 128 were female. Asphyxia, blunt force injuries, sharp force injuries, firearm injuries, and mixed modalities were identified as causes of death. Considering deaths due to firearm injuries only, 334 (68.2%) of the male homicides were due to firearm injuries, compared to 52 (40.6%) of the female homicides. This difference is highly statistically significant ($p < 0.0001$). In the group of 52 female firearm homicides, ages ranged from 5 to 93 years with an average of 41.7 years; 23 were married, 17 single, 8 divorced, 2 widowed, and 2 of unknown marital status; 21 were employed outside the home, 7 were homemakers, 5 students, 5 retired, and 2 unemployed. Blood alcohol levels in the decedents were positive in 21 cases and ranged from 3 to 24 mg/dL. In 34 cases, the shooting occurred inside a residence, 2 in unspecified buildings other than a residence, 8 on the street, 3 in vehicles, 2 at worksites, and 1 in a tavern. In 27 cases, the homicide was a consequence of domestic violence. Other motivations and/or circumstances included 6 reckless or unintentional shootings, 4 for financial gain, 2 in "heat of anger", 2 "mercy killings", 2 police officer involved shootings, 1 gang-related, 1 "recreational", 1 child abuse, and 1 due to ethnic hatred. Sexual assault did not appear to be a motivation in any case. Seven of the decedents were from incidents involving multiple homicides. Perpetrators were identified as 15 husbands; 17 boyfriends, ex-boyfriends, male room-mates or male acquaintances; 8 family members (child, parent, or other family member); 9 strangers, unknown assailants or unspecified male; and 1 female acquaintance. In 20 cases the perpetrator shot himself immediately after killing the female.

Conclusions: In this study, firearm injuries accounted for less than half of all female homicides and occurred most commonly in a setting of domestic or intimate partner violence. Typically the decedent was a mature woman and had stable employment. Perpetrators were nearly all males with a close or intimate relationship with his victim. Most instances occurred in homes, but it was not unusual for an ex-partner to make a deliberate attack elsewhere, such as at a worksite. Although attacks were often directed at intimate partners or ex-partners, sexual assault was not a factor in any case. Nevertheless, the emotional context of these homicides was evident in that nearly forty percent of the perpetrators shot themselves after killing the female. These findings support the conclusion that domestic violence and firearms are a dangerous combination.

Firearm Injuries, Female Homicides, Domestic Violence