



Pathology Biology Section – 2011

G62 Murder-Suicide in Fulton County, Georgia: 1992-2006

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the characteristics of murder-suicides occurring during a 15-year-period in Fulton County, Georgia, with emphasis on circumstances and relationships of perpetrators and victims.

This presentation will impact forensic science community by detailing the features of murder-suicide events and reviewing relevant literature, with the goal of providing information relevant to prevention strategies.

Background: Murder-suicide typically involves one or more homicides followed shortly thereafter (usually at the same time but sometimes later) by suicide of the perpetrator. The Fulton County Medical Examiner's Office previously reported a series of twelve murder-suicide cases which occurred in the years 1988-1991. This report is a follow up study of murder-suicide cases in Fulton County, Georgia, which occurred in the 15-year period of 1992 through 2006. Current data are compared with data from the earlier study and other studies reported in the literature.

Methods: The Fulton County Medical Examiner's Office maintains a comprehensive database which includes data items to record companion cases and for the past seven years, indication of whether death was part of a murder-suicide event. The data base was searched to detect murder-suicide events and to collect demographic, cause of death, and circumstantial information for each case. Results are compared with our previous study, the literature, and the incidents are classified in the context of a previously published classification scheme.

Results: 40 incidents occurred during the 15-year period. There were 40 suicides and 46 homicides for a total of 86 decedents. The number of incidents per year ranged from 1 to 6 with an average of 2.6, and the number of decedents per year ranged from 2 to 17 with an average of 5.5 per year. There were two decedents in 38 of the incidents, three decedents in one incident, and seven decedents in one incident. There was at least one murder-suicide event each year.

In every case, the perpetrator was male. Fourteen of the perpetrators (34%) tested positive for ethanol, five of the homicide victims (11%) tested positive for ethanol, and in three cases (7%), both the perpetrator and victim were positive for ethanol. In 8 cases (26%), the perpetrator was positive for stimulant drugs such as cocaine or methamphetamine.

In 34 incidents (85%), the perpetrator and victim were both shot. One incident involved sharp force injuries of both decedents, another incident involved thermal burns of both decedents, and in four incidents a combination of methods was used. 27 (66%) incidents occurred in or on the property of the perpetrator's place of residence. The most common circumstance was a boyfriend killing a girlfriend (n=13) or ex-girlfriend (n=3). The second most common was a husband killing his wife or ex-wife (n=11). An employee killed a coworker in three incidents. In two incidents, one male killed another male during an argument.

Of the perpetrators (all male), 9 (23%) were White, 6 (15%) were Hispanic/Latino, and 25 (63%) were Black. Both Hispanics and Blacks were overrepresented in comparison with their prevalence (43% and 8% respectively) in the county population while whites were under-represented (account for about 50% of the population). In 37 incidents (93%), all decedents were of the same race. In three cases, the perpetrator was Hispanic/Latino and the victim was White (non-Hispanic). A male killed one or more females in 34 of the 40 incidents (85% of cases).

The number of days between incidents ranged from 12 to 483 with a median of 125 days and a mean of 142 days. Thus, evidence of short term clustering was minimal except for two incidents in late June and early July of 1999. The same year which had the maximum number of incidents (n=6).

Comparison of the present study to our previous study shows only slight differences in the trends observed, which may relate mainly to the much larger size of the most recent case series.

Using the classification scheme of Marzuk, Tardiff, and Hirsch, the most common type of incident (71% of incidents) was "Spousal or Consortial" (in which we included spouses, former spouses, girlfriends, and ex-girlfriends) and the most common motive (27% of incidents) was "Amorous Jealousy." A similar portion of cases involved some form of argument or relationship problem which was not further clarified. Of note, 12 cases (30% of incidents) involved motives that were not apparent. This finding points out the difficulty in clarifying the motive when the people who might be able to explain what happened are dead and further specific information cannot be determined.

All but three incidents involved circumstances in which the deaths of the victims and perpetrators had a close temporal relationship. In one case, the perpetrator died in the hospital after a two months stay for his self inflicted gunshot wound. In a second and atypical case, the perpetrator committed suicide in jail several months



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after being arrested for the murder of the victim. In the third case, the homicide victim died about five months after the incident from ongoing complications of her gunshot wounds.

Conclusions: Similar to other studies, murder-suicides in Fulton County, Georgia show a low but stable rate of occurrence with a predominance of male perpetrators, female homicide victims, same-race victims, two deceased persons, a victim-perpetrator relationship such as a spouse or girlfriend, and causes of death which predominantly involve gunshot wounds.

Murder-Suicide, Homicide-Suicide, Violent Death