



### H131 The Effect of Public Awareness and Legislation Against Strangulation on the Occurrence of Gender-Based Violence in King County, Washington

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be able to: (1) list various national and local efforts directed against intimate partner and domestic violence; (2) explain the legal definition of strangulation; (3) trace the rates of all female homicides and those due to strangulation from 1980 to 2016; and, (4) evaluate the evidence that national and local policies and efforts are important in controlling gender-based violence.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by tracing the declining occurrence of female homicides in King County, WA, from 1980 to 2016 and by illustrating that female homicides due to strangulation constitute a substantial proportion of deaths due to intimate partner and domestic violence. The results of this study provide evidence that local and national efforts directed against gender-based violence are important for controlling these crimes.

Since the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was passed in 1994, a number of national and local initiatives have increased public awareness, criminal investigations, and prosecutions directed against Intimate Partner Violence and Domestic Violence (IPV/DV). More recently, in 2007, Washington State enacted legislation promoted by the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office making strangulation an aggravated assault (Assault 2 felony offense) if prosecution proves that the defendant interfered with the victim's ability to breathe or restricted blood flow to the brain. Because IPV/DV continues to be a major concern in gender-based violence, the present study was conducted to analyze the occurrence of female homicides over the past four decades with special attention to the proportion of female homicides by strangulation.

**Methods and Materials:** Records of the King County Medical Examiner's office from 1978 to present were reviewed to identify all female homicides occurring in King County according to demographics and mechanism of injury. Data from the Washington Attorney General's Office Homicide Investigation Tracking System were used to identify motives for assault. Data from the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office and Washington State Administrative Office of the Courts were used to estimate the number of non-fatal domestic violence assaults charged with strangulation.

**Results:** There were a total of 848 homicides resulting in the death of females in King County over the nearly four-decade period of this study. Despite considerable year-to-year variation, there was a progressive decrease in the number of female homicides. From 1980 to 1989, there were an average of 28.6 female homicides per year; from 1990 to 1999, 25.2 per year; from 2000 to 2009, 15.7 per year; and from 2010 to 2016, 14.4 per year. From 1980 to 2016, strangulation was involved in 20% of cases in which there was a known cause of death and in 14% of female homicides perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner. The proportion of female homicides by strangulation declined as follows: from 1980 to 1989, 23%; from 1990 to 1999, 17%; from 2000 to 2009, 15%; and from 2010 to 2016, 12%. After the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office Domestic Violence Unit was established in 2000, the number of domestic violence felony filings averaged approximately 1,200 per year, and after the strangulation law went into effect in 2007, strangulation became one of the most frequently filed charges. Correspondingly, from 2007 through 2016, 13% of female homicides were by strangulation, compared to 19% of female homicides by strangulation from 1980 to 2006.

**Discussion and Conclusions:** The results of this study reveal that strangulation accounts for a considerable proportion of female homicides, especially in IPV/DV. Over the past four decades, the annual number of female homicides has declined by 50%. The proportion of deaths due to strangulation has declined by nearly the same extent. While it is difficult to attribute any single policy or initiative to the declining rates, it is reasonable to conclude that public campaigns to enhance awareness, as well as criminal investigation and prosecution of gender-based violence, are important deterrents of intimate partner and domestic violence.

#### Female Homicides, Domestic Violence, Strangulation