

## I13 Family Mass Murders in Italy, 1990-2019

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**Learning Overview:** After attending this presentation, attendees will have learned about the features of family mass murders that occurred in Italy between 1990 and 2019.

**Impact on the Forensic Science Community:** This presentation will impact the forensic science community by adding new knowledge about an uncommon type of murder that has received little attention from the scientific literature.

Family mass murder (or familicide) is a multiple-victim homicide of all, or most all, the family members. It is sometimes followed by the suicide of the killer.<sup>1-3</sup> Although uncommon, familicide is the most frequently occurring type of mass murder in Italy. The perpetrator may be motivated by a desire for revenge after a separation or perceived wrongdoing or driven by the compassionate motive to ease unbearable suffering.<sup>3,4</sup> However, the reasons behind familicide are often hard to discern even after extended criminal and psychological investigations. Research is hindered by the lack of a national database on familicide as a separate entity from any intrafamilial homicide.

In order to contribute to the knowledge of this topic, a systematic search of cases of familicide that occurred in Italy in the past 30 years was conducted. Familicide was defined as the homicide of the partner or ex-partner and one child/stepchild or more or the homicide of at least two family members of different generations.

Reports of familicides were collected through a review of the online archives of the main national newspapers from January 1990 to August 2019. When possible, data on individual events were cross-referenced for better accuracy. Inclusion criteria consisted of a minimum set of data: date and place of the event, characteristics of the killer, characteristics of the victims, and circumstances of the homicides. Data were divided into categories and compiled into a spreadsheet using Microsoft® Excel®. Categories were examined through univariate and bivariate statistical analysis.

The research identified 52 cases of family mass murder for a total of 165 victims (including 37 perpetrators who committed suicide). Of those, 96.2% ( $n=50$ ) of killers were men. In 82.7% ( $n=43$ ) of cases, the murderer was the male head of the family (father/husband/stepfather). In 30.8% ( $n=16$ ) of perpetrators fell into the 41–50 year old age group while 21.5% ( $n=11$ ) equally belonged to the 31–40 and the 51–60-year-old age groups. The killer was married to one of the victims in 78.8% ( $n=41$ ) of cases and had a job in 61.5% ( $n=32$ ) of cases. The total number of victims was three in 55.8% ( $n=29$ ) of cases. Adult victims (>18 years old) were evenly distributed across the age groups. Underage victims (<18 years old) were <12 years old in 59% ( $n=32$ ) of cases, with a mode of 4 years old. Wives/ex-wives were 43 out of 74 adult victims (58.1%). The family group was of non-Italian ethnicity in 11.5% ( $n=6$ ) of cases. Familicides were slightly more frequent in wintertime ( $n=19$ ; 36.5%) and mostly occurred in southern Italy ( $n=24$ ; 46.1%). Another 88.5% ( $n=46$ ) of familicides took place in the family home or the home of a family member. Perpetrators mainly used firearms ( $n=24$ ; 46.1%), knives or cutting instruments ( $n=12$ ; 23.1%), blunt objects ( $n=6$ ; 11.5%), or a combination of instruments ( $n=6$ ; 11.5%). Overkill was reported in 44.2% of cases ( $n=23$ ). The murderer committed suicide in 71.1% ( $n=37$ ) of cases and attempted, but failed, in 11.5% ( $n=6$ ) of cases. Favored methods of suicide were firearms ( $n=19$ ; 51.3%), knives or cutting instruments ( $n=6$ ; 16.2%), and hanging ( $n=6$ ; 16.2%). Prevalent family contexts were abnormal life experiences ( $n=13$ ; 25%), separation ( $n=12$ ; 23.1%), and prolonged family conflict ( $n=9$ ; 17.3%).<sup>5</sup> In five cases (9.6%), no warning signs were reported. A statistically significant association ( $p$  value=0.04) was found between overkill and instruments other than firearms.

In conclusion, this study identified warning signs and at-risk family contexts that can potentially result in a familicide. Family-centered policies are needed to improve support for people with mental health problems or financial difficulties. Public health authorities, social services, and law enforcement should cooperate in a strategy for early intervention based on risk factors. Further research on familicide in Italy and other countries should be carried out, especially to better comprehend the alarming cases where no warning signs could be detected.

### Reference(s):

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### Familicide, Family Mass Murder, Warning Signs