1996

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE COORDINATING COUNCIL OF GREATER CLEVELAND
CUYAHOGA COUNTY DEATH REVIEW COMMITTEE

COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND RELATED HOMICIDES

The Death Review Committee has meet monthly for the past year to review domestic violence and related homicides in Cuyahoga County. The Committee's mandate is to gain an understanding of these homicides that can aid in developing prevention and intervention efforts to be more effective in reducing future deaths.

The Committee membership, representative of diverse public and private agencies, offers broad interdisciplinary expertise. The membership roster and operating guidelines are attached to this report.

A screening subcommittee identified the 22 domestic violence and related homicide cases through reviewing all 144 homicides that occurred in the county during the year 1996 (as ruled by the Coroner). This represents 15% of all homicides occurring in Cuyahoga County during the year 1996.

Case screening was necessary since homicides in this county are not categorized as domestic violence. Through this method, 19 cases met the definition of domestic violence (according to the Ohio Revised Code); while three homicides closely associated with domestic violence (e.g., two between intimate partners that did not reside together; and one a police domestic violence intervention). Cases from the year 1996 were selected to obtain closed cases with dispositions. Two suicides associated with these 22 homicides were also studied. This represents 1.3% of the counties annual suicides in 1996.

The Death Review Committee has investigated, using data from multiple record sources, the 22 cases of domestic violence and related homicides that occurred in 1996. Record searching and interpretation was challenging to say the least. The information available to us in existing agency records is rather sketchy, incomplete and often inconsistent. Particularly, missing data in the file cannot be interpreted as meaning the issue wasn't present in the case. In addition, some case names (perpetrators, victims, and family members) are not completely correct nor do they also contain unique identifying numbers or permanent addresses that would enable a definitive records search.

Notable complexities in case records reviews include: multiple name uses, addresses, and partners, family members and children. Moreover, the respective homicide victims and perpetrators may not align with the prior domestic violence victims or perpetrators. There may be multiple relationships involving three or four parties to the homicides and prior domestic violence status. It is difficult to verify retrospectively domestic violence history, substance use history and agency contacts. Marital status is even difficult to obtain due to common-law and living-as-spouse situations. Individuals' marital statuses may or may not relate to the relationship involved in the homicides. Residential mobility, within and between towns, counties and/or states, makes tracking more difficult as does the passage of time over the life span.

Local domestic violence shelter service records were checked; though the anonymous hotline records could not be checked. Protection orders were not centrally filed or recorded in any single agency in 1996. Police records in the county are part of a central computer system.

Further, the issue of confidentiality plagued our efforts. Some records were not made available to the Committee due to legal confidentiality agency constraints (e.g., Mental Health, Drug Board). Hospital records were not checked due to confidentiality and lack of available staffing. Our request for records from the Department of Children and Family Services is still under legal review as of this writing.

The Committee, throughout our review process, identified and invited additional agency representatives whose presence would aid in our work as well as additional data sources that would shed light on the cases. The Committee also considered but did not have the resources to conduct a primary source investigation of these cases which would involve locating family members and conducting interviews. The Committee process continuously evolves through our gained experience to improve the reliability and validity of the investigation.

The Committee will continue its review process on 1997 homicides. All members agree that we have gained valuable experience during our initial year of service that will expedite our next year's work. Meetings are held the first Tuesday of the month at 1 p.m. at the County Coroner's Office. Membership is open.

From the information obtained, a descriptive summary of major findings and trends are highlighted below. All data below is from the 22 cases analyzed to date which constitute all cases (i.e., not a sample) occurring in a single year,1996. Due to the small number of cases, it is premature to draw any firm implications or inferences since these homicides may or may not be representative of all domestic violence and related homicides occurring in other years. That said, there are lessons to be learned from these observations, even from a single case, if it suggests ways to prevent or reduce the numbers of future domestic violence and related homicides.

Before presenting the specific major findings, general observations about the cases are offered.

1. A diverse range of ages and relationships were represented in homicide victims and perpetrators.
2. Demographic composition of cases parallels yet diverges from overall county homicide cases.
3. Victims and perpetrators had little past or current service agency contact, save in child abuse cases.
4. Victims and perpetrators had intermittent past law enforcement and criminal justice system contact.
5. Almost no perpetrators were currently on probation, parole, out on bond, or subject to protection orders.
6. Almost no perpetrator-victim dyads were involved in divorce, custody or visitation disputes.
7. Lifetime patterns of domestic violence were apparent.
8. Patterns of escalating lethality were not clearly detectable.
9. Patterns of general criminality were present in victims and perpetrators.
10. Alcohol and drugs were factors in victims and perpetrators.
11. Cases were concentrated in Cleveland's east-side central city.
12. Minorities were disproportionately represented in cases in comparison to the county population.
13. Females were disproportionately represented in cases in comparison to the overall county homicides.
14. Partner homicide and other family and household member homicides were about equally represented.
15. Relationship separation factors were factors in some of the cases.
16. Guns were dominant murder weapon though not as widely used as in other homicide cases.
17. No current known safety plans, panic buttons, alarm systems were in place.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND RELATED 1996 HOMICIDE CASE CHARACTERISTICS
[Selected Comparisons to Overall Cuyahoga County1996 Homicide Case Characteristics]

◊ Case dispositions were: 15 (68%) criminal sentences; 3 (14%) no bill; 2 (9%) abated by suicide; 1 (5%) charge pending; 1 (5%) legal intervention.

◊ Cases involved: 41% parent-child-relatives; 32% spouses/partners; 14% parties connected with spouses/partners; 9% intimate partners (not residing together); 5% police officer legal intervention.

◊ 9 cases (41%) were partner homicides; 3 (18%) partner-related homicides; 10 (46%) related to other family members.

◊ 91% of cases were in the City of Cleveland; mostly occurring in the central east side SPAs.
[79% of cases were in the City of Cleveland; mostly occurring in the central east side SPAs.]

◊ 91% of cases occurred at home.
[40% of cases occurred at home.]

◊ 41% of victims were shot; 23% were stabbed and 23% assaulted.
[65% of victims were shot; 22% were stabbed and 15% assaulted.]

◊ 95% of perpetrators were adults; 1 a juvenile.

◊ 77% of victims were adults; 23% children.
[80% of victims were adults; 20% children.]

◊ Children were involved in 12 (55%) homicides; 6 (27%) present; 5 (23%) as victims; 1 (5%) as suspect.

◊ Males comprised most of the perpetrators (64%) as well as victims (54%).
[Males comprised most of the perpetrators (79%) as well as victims (78%).]

◊ Females comprised 36% of the perpetrators and 46% of the victims.
[Females comprised 21% of the perpetrators and 22% of the victims.]

◊ Adult victims were 65% male; child victims were 80% female.

◊ In 55% of cases, perpetrator and victim were of same sex; in 45%, they were of the opposite sex.

◊ Age range of perpetrators was 15 to 73 years; of victims, <1 to 78 years.

◊ 82% of perpetrators were minorities (non-white).

◊ 82% of victims were minorities (non-white).
[74% of victims were minorities (non-white).]

◇ 91% of homicides occurred within racial/ethnic groups.

◇ 2 of the cases involved homicide accompanied by suicide; both were male perpetrators.

◇ One additional person (other than the victim) was wounded as a result of the homicides.

◇ 14% of victims had disabilities.

◇ 53% of victims and 48% of perpetrators were employed at time of the homicide.

◇ Only 1 perpetrator and 1 victim were on public assistance at time of homicide.

◇ 36% of victims tested positive on alcohol upon autopsy.
[39% of victims tested positive on alcohol upon autopsy.]

◇ 59% of adult victims and 46% of all perpetrators had reported alcohol use problem.

◇ 35% of adult victims and 50% of all perpetrators had reported drug use problem.

◇ 77% of adult victims and 59% of all perpetrators had criminal records (non-domestic violence).

◇ 86% of victims and 82% of perpetrators had abuse histories (alleged, reported or adjudicated).

◇ Homicide victims had been abuse victims (55%); perpetrators (27%); mutual combatants (5%).

◇ Homicide perpetrators had been abuse victims (9%); perpetrators (59%); mutual combatants (14%).

◇ All 5 child abuse victims' families had prior abuse records with the County DCFS.

◇ Four out of 5 (80%) of the child abuse homicides were perpetrated by females.

◇ Of the 4 females who killed male partners: 3 as abuse victims; 1 was identified as an abusers.

◇ Of the 5 males who killed female partners: 5 were identified as abusers.

◇ In 9 partner homicides: 5 (56%) were intact ; 1 former (11%); 3 attempting to separate (33%).

◇ Relationship separation (2-actual; 3-attempted) was a precipitating factor in 5 (27%) homicides.

◇ No cases were known to be related to divorce, custody disputes or visitation.

◇ No protection orders known to be in place relative to the homicide victims.

◇ No perpetrators were on bail or parole.

◇ 1 victim and 1 perpetrator were on active probation at time of homicide.

◇ 1 victim and 1 perpetrator had pending domestic dispute cases at time of homicide.

◇ No women's shelters or victims services agency known contacts by homicide victims.

◇ Very few social service contacts by perpetrators or victims, except for child abuse cases.