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FIREARM USE IN INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

A Brief Overview

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Readers of this volume are likely to have specific interests in domestic violence or in firearms policy. It is not assumed, however, that the typical reader will know about the interface of the two fields. Thus, the volume begins with a synopsis of the epidemiology of weapon use in intimate partner violence. The purpose of this article is to help readers better understand the nature of the problem, obtain knowledge that will provide a context for the policy, and understand practice implications of the articles that follow.

Keywords: *firearms; intimate partner violence; violence prevention; policy; norms*

When people speak of murder, they usually think of men—men as victims, men as perpetrators. Although men's risk of homicide is higher than that of women, few realize that homicide ranks similarly as a cause of death for men and women. As shown in Table 1, homicide is the second leading cause of death for adolescents and young adults in the United States—for both men and women. Firearms are the most commonly used weapon in the homicide of men and women.

There are important differences, however, in the homicides of men and women. Two primary differences are the place of the homicide and the nature of the victim-suspect relationship. Men are most likely to be killed in the street or other public place; women are most likely to be murdered at home. Acquaintances pose the greatest risk to men; current or former

AUTHOR'S NOTE: For a more detailed review, the interested reader is referred to Sorenson (2006). This special issue is dedicated to the memory of Linda Saltzman and Susan Schechter. I would like to express my appreciation to the reviewers for this special issue: Sarah Buel, Philip J. Cook, Jeffrey Fagan, Victoria Holt, Arthur Kellermann, Judith McFarlane, Carol Runyan, and Franklin Zimring. Thanks also goes to the Joyce Foundation, whose support allowed for the compilation of the papers and the dissemination of the journal to policy makers, state attorneys general, district and city attorneys, law enforcement officers, chief probation officers, judges, prevention advocates, and researchers.

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TABLE 1: Rank of Homicide as Cause of Death, by Age and Sex, United States, 2000

Rank	Age (years)						
	1-4	5-9	10-14	15-19	20-24	25-34	35-44
1							
2				M	M, F		
3	M, F			F		M	
4		M, F	M, F				
5						F	
6							M
7							
8							F
9							
10							

SOURCE: National Vital Statistics data, <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/wisqars/> (accessed September 24, 2005).

NOTE: Age categories for persons 45 years and older are not shown because homicide is not one of the leading causes of death in those age groups. M = male; F = female.

intimate partners present the greatest risk to women. In recent years, intimate partner homicides composed only 4% of the murders of men but about one third of the murders of women (Rennison 2003).

TRENDS

Tallies of intimate partner homicide initially were limited to those involving current legal or common-law spouses. The definition was expanded over time in recognition that such violence is not limited to current relationships, legally recognized relationships, or heterosexual relationships. A framework of intimate partners, rather than spouses, is important to capture the phenomenon most fully. For example, among 25- to 44-year-olds, it appears that girlfriends, rather than wives, are at highest risk of being killed by an intimate (Fox and Zawitz n.d.). National homicide data include former spouses but continue to exclude former boyfriends and girlfriends in the definition of an intimate partner.¹

Despite the burgeoning number of emergency shelters for battered women and the recent development of long-term shelters, large numbers of women continue to be killed by their intimate partners. (See Dugan, Nagin, and Rosenfeld [1999] for an analysis of the relationship between resource

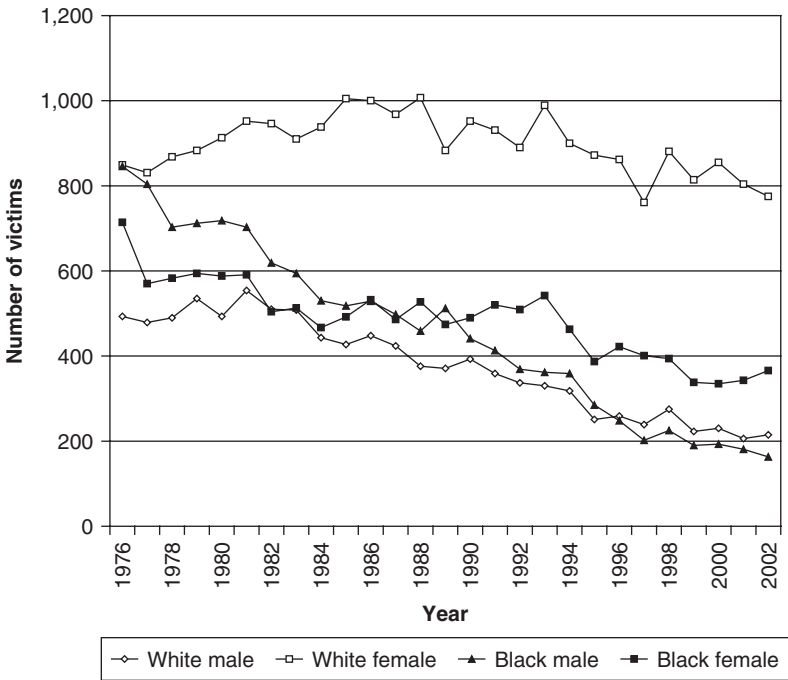


Figure 1: Intimate Partner Homicide Victims by Sex and Race, United States, 1976-2002

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (1980-2002), <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/intimates> (accessed April 4, 2005).

allocation and intimate partner homicide.) As shown in Figure 1, fewer and fewer men were killed by their intimate partners during the past several decades, but the number of women, particularly White women, killed changed relatively little. Because rates of intimate partner homicide declined faster for men than for women, the ratio of female-to-male intimate partner homicide victimization was higher in 2002 than it was in 1976. In 1976, there were 1.17 female victims for every male victim of intimate partner homicide; in 2002, there were 3.02 female victims for every male victim. An increasing female-to-male ratio of intimate partner homicide is observed for both Blacks (0.84 in 1976 to 2.25 in 1999) and Whites (1.72 in 1976 to 3.60 in 1999). Thus, in the past generation, the phenomenon of intimate partner homicide has changed to be largely the homicide of women.

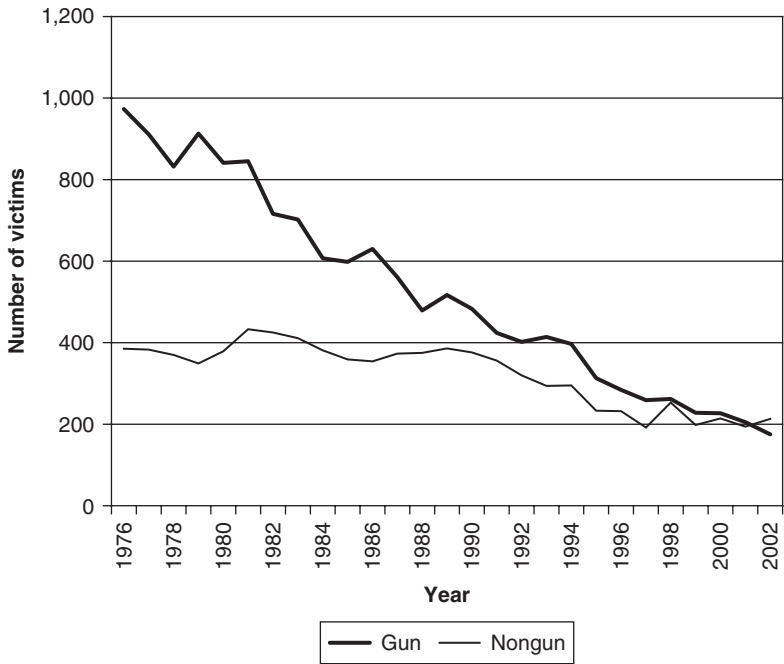


Figure 2: Male Victims of Intimate Partner Homicide by Type of Weapon, United States, 1976-2002

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (1980-2002), <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/intimates> (accessed April 4, 2005).

FIREARMS

FATALITIES

Although the sheer number of homicides has dropped, firearms continue to figure prominently in intimate partner homicide. As seen in Figures 2 and 3, if a firearm is used in an intimate partner homicide, it is likely to be used to kill a woman. A history of physical abuse of the woman by the man is observed in a great majority of intimate partner homicides, irrespective of which person is killed.

Despite a general emphasis on danger posed by strangers, intimate partners with guns present the greatest fatal risk to women. Women are more than twice as likely to be shot by their male intimates as they are to be shot, stabbed, strangled, bludgeoned, or killed in any other way by a stranger (Kellermann and

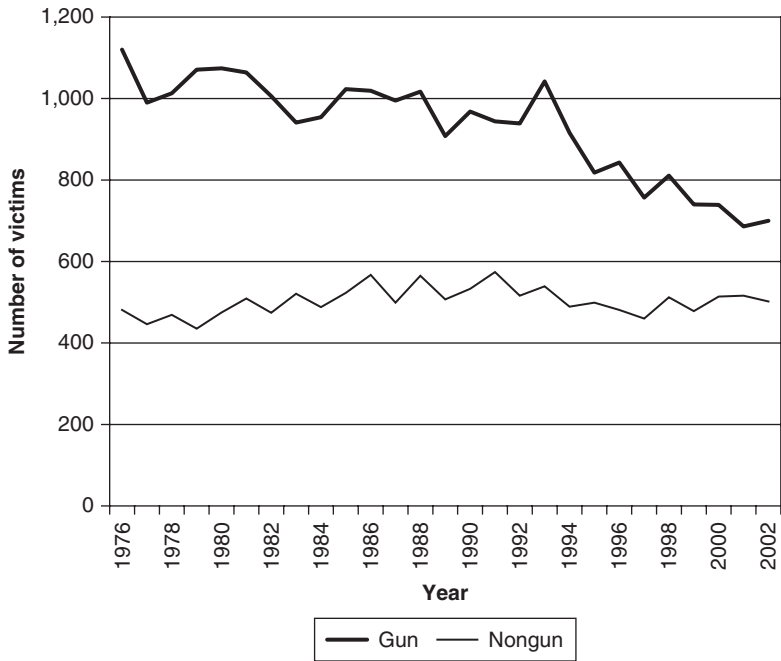


Figure 3: Female Victims of Intimate Partner Homicide by Type of Weapon, United States, 1976-2002

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (1980-2002), <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/intimates> (accessed April 4, 2005).

Mercy 1992). A handgun is the weapon of choice. In addition, as shown in Figure 4, the most recent data available indicate that as homicides of women by strangers have decreased, the number of homicides by intimates with handguns has increased.

NONFATALS

Fatalities are not the only way in which firearms and other weapons are used in intimate partner violence. This observation is important because most intimate partner violence is ongoing, nonfatal abuse. Fewer than one quarter of 1% of intimate partner assaults are fatal. Nonetheless, when there has been a history of violence against the woman by her male intimate, regardless of other demographic characteristics of the victim or the

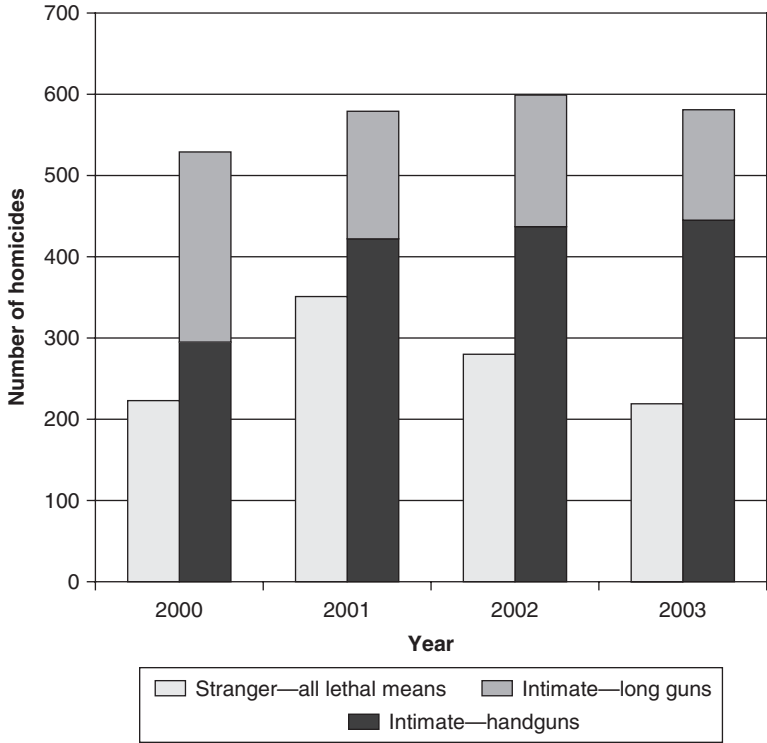


Figure 4: Homicides of Women by Male Intimates With Firearms Versus Strangers Regardless of Weapon, United States, 2000-2003

SOURCE: Analysis performed by the author using computer files for 2000 to 2003 data from the U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation (Uniform Crime Reporting Program Data [United States]: Supplementary Homicide Reports. ICPSR ed. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research).

assailant, characteristics of their relationship, forms of prior abuse, and a host of other variables, his access to a gun is a potent predictor of a fatal assault (Campbell et al. 2003).

Recent research indicates that the gender discrepancy in firearm use among intimates holds for nonfatal as well as fatal violence. National hospital discharge data document that men are 8 times more likely than are

women to be treated for a gunshot wound (Gotsch et al. 2001) but that women are 3.6 times more likely than are men to be shot by a current or former spouse than by a stranger (Wiebe 2003). In a national survey of the general population, women were more likely than were men to have a gun used against them by an intimate partner: threatened with a gun (3.5% for women vs. 0.4% for men) and gun used against them (0.7% for women vs. 0.1% for men; Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). Whereas the base rates are low, these percentages translate to unsettling numbers: 16 in every 1,000 U.S. women have been threatened with a gun, and 7 in 1,000 have had a gun used against them by an intimate partner.

Firearms are used in ways that do not result in firearm-related injuries. A gun can be used to coerce behaviors such as sex, as a means to inflict terror, and so on. Firearms, particularly handguns, may be more common in homes where battering has occurred than in the general population. In a statewide survey of residents of battered women's shelters, more than one third (36.7%) of the sheltered women reported that there was a firearm in the home (Sorenson and Wiebe 2004). Only about one sixth (16.7%) of women in the general California population report that there is a firearm in the home (Center for Health Policy and Research 2001). In two thirds of the battered women's households that contained a firearm, the intimate partner used the gun(s) against the woman, usually threatening to shoot/kill her (71.4%) or to shoot at her (5.1%). In other words, when there was a gun in the home where battering had occurred, it commonly was used against the woman.

CONCLUSIONS

Firearms and intimate partners present a particular risk to women's health and safety. Policies designed to prevent the homicide of women that focus on male intimates and firearms are supported by the available data.

NOTE

1. Practical implications of the definition of intimate partner can be illustrated using homicide data from one state. From 1990 to 1999, 1,192 California homicides were classified as spousal, that is, legal and common-law spouses. If a broader category of intimate partners is used that includes ex-spouses and current and former girlfriends and boyfriends, the number of homicides nearly doubles to 2,313. (Analyses were performed by the author using homicide data from the California Department of Justice.)

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