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Women Likelier to Be Slain by a Partner than a Stranger

By Nina Bernstein and Leslie Kaufman

A woman in New York City is more likely to be killed by an intimate partner than by a stranger, especially if she is young and foreign-born, a new study by the city's Health Department concluded.

Lovers and husbands were responsible for almost 60 percent of the deaths of women between 20 and 50, the study found, and such victims were 87 percent more likely than those killed by strangers to be foreign-born.

"When we get a finding like this that's so solid, we have to ask, 'What is going on?'" the study's author, Dr. Susan Wilt, said. "It's a message that has to be gotten out to groups that work with immigrant women."

While the overall rate of female homicide declined from 1995 to 2002, the years most closely analyzed the rate of women killed by intimate partners stayed nearly steady.

Over all, of 1,030 deaths of females over 12 classified as homicides from 1995 to 2002, 339 were committed by intimate partners, 369 by others, and 322 were unknown.

A little more than a third of the women killed by intimate partners were in their 20's, the study reported, and nearly that many were in their 30's. Women over 50 were far more likely to be killed by strangers.

Nearly 60 percent of the women over all were killed in their own homes. A third were stabbed, and a third were shot. In about a fifth of the cases, the killer committed suicide – nearly a quarter in the case of an intimate killer.

The vulnerability of immigrant women came through in a variety of ways: 57 percent of all foreign-born victims were killed by intimate partners, and just over 50 percent of all the women killed by intimate partners were immigrants. But immigrant women were only 35 percent of those killed by others, the study found. Among the special risks they face, Dr. Wilt suggested, might be the stress that immigration places on relationships, and a greater fear of seeking help outside the family.

“It may show how difficult immigration is,” Dr. Wilt said. “Gender roles change, everything changes. There is the fear of seeking help, certainly if you are undocumented, and the difficulty of finding services, especially if you don’t speak English.”

Dr. Wilt described one of the first killings she examined as a classic case. The victim, a Hispanic woman in Manhattan, had returned to work after the birth of a second child, in an office with many male co-workers. Nervous about her partner’s jealousy, she had taken away his gun.

“The man borrowed a gun from a friend, killed her, and killed himself,” Dr. Wilts said. “And the kids went running into the street, full of blood.”

Carolyn A. Kubitschek, a lawyer who is an expert in domestic violence, pointed to a shortage of shelter space for those fleeing violent relationships. “One of the big dilemmas is where can these women go,” she said. “There are still battered women who need a place to go tonight and can’t find it.”

Ms. Kubitschek, who successfully sued the city to stop its practice of placing the children of battered women in foster care, said that as recently as 2002, victims of domestic violence faced a terrible dilemma. “Women are most likely to be killed if they leave their batterer, but if they stayed they could lose their kids,” she said. “So if she stayed, she risked losing her kids, if she left she risked losing her life.”

According to the Health Department report, “Femicide in New York City 1995-2002,” 49 percent of all the women killed were black, and they made up 46 percent of those killed by an intimate partner.

Among Hispanic victims, however, killings were more likely to be committed by intimates: Hispanic women accounted for a third of all the women killed by intimate partners, and less than a quarter of other deaths. And Asian women – nearly all of them foreign-born – accounted for 7 percent of the women killed by an intimate and only 4 percent of women who were killed by someone who was not close to them.

Among white victims, the statistics were skewed the other way: 37 percent were victims of an intimate partner, and 63 percent were not.

The deaths were spread almost evenly in thirds over lower, middle and upper median income groups, with upper income defined as in excess of \$34,933 a year. Women who were victims of intimate partners were less likely to have been sexually assaulted, and less likely to test positive for drugs than women who were killed by someone else.

One of the study’s major conclusions is that crime-fighting that led to steep declines in other killings had little effect on the number of women killed by partners. “Intimate partner femicide remains a major public health issue in New York City,” the study concluded.

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