

English Summary

Acts of lethal violence against women in intimate relationships

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Relatively little is known about acts of lethal violence committed against women within the context of an intimate relationship in Sweden. How many victims are there of this type of offence, for example? On the basis of data covering all cases of lethal violence reported to the police during the 1990s, a compilation has been made of all information relating to cases of lethal violence against women in intimate relationships. The factual basis of this report thus comprises a study of all cases of murder, manslaughter and assault resulting in the death of the victim committed against women in the context of an intimate relationship during the period 1990 to 1999.

Lethal violence against women in intimate relationships is on the decline

Each year an average of 90 persons are killed by means of criminal, lethal violence. Of these, approximately one third are women (33 per year). Sixteen (16) of these women are killed by a man who is involved in an intimate relationship with the victim at the time of the offence, or has been involved in such a relationship with the victim at some point prior to the offence, i.e. as current or former husband, common law husband, fiancé or boyfriend. On the basis of reports in the media, it would be easy to imagine that offences of this nature were on the increase. Comparisons with the 1970s however show that cases of lethal violence against women in intimate relationships have

declined by approximately 30 per cent. There is no obvious, unequivocal explanation for why this should be the case. Social change and an increase in the level of attention focused on violence against women may have had an impact, as may certain legislative changes. Medical advances which have increased the success rate in dealing with victims of knife-wounds may also have played a part. It is undoubtedly the case that media attention, which has increased levels of awareness of violence against women, has played a significant role, as has the emergence of women's help-lines and shelters.

Many of the perpetrators have threatened and assaulted the victim on previous occasions

It is very common for the perpetrators of this offence to have threatened and assaulted the woman previously. In more than 40 per cent of cases, the data show that threats have been made earlier, and in more than one-third of cases there is evidence of previous assaults. These figures should only be regarded as a lower limit, however, since they include only those cases where these prior incidents were recorded in the current police investigation.

In 60 per cent of cases, the crime was motivated by jealousy or problems in connection with a separation. The perpetrators, who are often individuals with a pronounced need to control, have killed the woman when they felt this need to be under threat.

Knives are the most common method

As with lethal violence in general, the use of a knife is the method most commonly found in these incidents. Since the 1970s, the use of knives has become increasingly common.

Strangulation is more than twice as common here as it is in other forms of lethal violence. It is also relatively common for there to be a physical assault of some kind. It is uncommon, on the other hand, for women to be killed exclusively as a result of such an assault (i.e. to die as a result of kicks and punches). On average one such incident occurs per year.

Guns are involved in just under 20 per cent of cases, and the proportion of incidents featuring weapons of this kind has decreased since the 1970s.

Mental illnesses or disorders are common

It is very common for the perpetrators of these offences to be suffering from some form of mental illness or other mental disorder. Eighty per cent of the men who kill women in the context of an intimate relationship are mentally ill or mentally disturbed. According to forensic psychiatric data, two forms of diagnosis dominate among these men; psychoses and personality disorders.

In a quarter of cases, the perpetrators commit suicide in connection with the offence. These men are twice as often found to be suffering from a mental illness as the other perpetrators.

The role played by alcohol is considerably less important in relation to lethal violence perpetrated against women in intimate relationships than it is in connection with lethal violence more generally.

Both victims and perpetrators are often of foreign origin.

A large proportion of both the perpetrators and the victims were born outside Sweden. Almost 40 per cent of the perpetrators and 30 per cent of the victims were born in another country and it is very common for the victim and the perpetrator to come from the same country. It is not uncommon that the families in question left their countries of origin for political reasons. A majority of the perpetrators born abroad come from another European country.

Perpetrators are often low status individuals with a criminal record

The perpetrators are usually individuals with low social status. In almost half the cases they are unemployed, in public sector 'back-to-work' schemes, or have a disability pension.

In 60 per cent of cases, the perpetrators had previous convictions, predominantly for threatening behaviour, violence, theft and motoring offences.

Incidents of lethal violence against women in intimate relationships are more often classified as murder than cases of lethal violence in general

The classification of offences relating to lethal violence against women in intimate relationships is usually significantly more severe than in the case of lethal violence more generally. In just over 70 per cent of cases of lethal violence against women in intimate relationships, the offence is adjudged to constitute a murder. The corresponding proportion of cases of lethal violence in general is 56 per cent.

As regards the choice of sanction, there are above all two circumstances that differentiate lethal violence against women in intimate relationships from lethal violence more generally. The first is that a larger proportion of men are sentenced to forensic psychiatric care than in the case of lethal violence more generally. The other is that they are on average given longer prison sentences. The longer prison sentences result from the fact that a large proportion of these cases are classified as murder.