

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Iowa Domestic Abuse Death Review Team met a total of seven times during calendar years 2007 and 2008 to review domestic abuse deaths. The team reviewed a total of 33 cases, involving a total of 52 deaths.

The cases were identified by autopsy reports received by the Office of the State Medical Examiner and crime victim compensation applications received by the Iowa Department of Justice. Deaths included all homicides and suicides in Iowa that occurred within an intimate partner relationship. The team only reviewed those cases in which an initial criminal conviction had occurred or the outcome was a homicide/suicide. For this reason, the cases included in this report involve deaths that occurred as far back as 2004 and as recently as 2007.

Summary of Findings

Domestic abuse homicides in Iowa are largely crimes of gender violence, meaning that the predominant victims are female. In the cases reviewed for this report, 93.9 percent of the homicide perpetrators were men. Forty-two percent of the homicide perpetrators also took their own lives. In addition to the domestic violence victims and the two domestic violence perpetrators who were killed, another 10 people died – five children, three individuals who were new partners of the victim, and two others who were family members of the victim or the perpetrator.

In one-third of the cases, there was evidence the domestic violence victims had been trying to end the relationship with their perpetrators. The most common “precipitating” factor immediate to the homicide was threat of loss of the relationship, either from a decision made by the victim to end the relationship or the presence of a new intimate partner. National studies conclude that women are at greatest risk of homicide when they file for divorce, obtain a protection order or make other efforts to end the relationship. In 51 percent of the cases reviewed for this report, the couple had not been separated; in another 30 percent, the homicide occurred within the first month of separation.

The second most common factor immediate to the homicide was alcohol or drug use. The team noted that this factor was present in more of the cases than in prior years. Members believe that the use of substances prior to the homicide event in several cases contributed to the lethality of the domestic incident and that the deaths may not have occurred if either of the partners had not been under the influence. There is little evidence to indicate that domestic violence perpetrators are getting substance abuse assessment and treatment when needed.

The most common means of death was by firearm. Gunshot wound was the cause of death in 67.3 percent of all deaths. In addition, all of the perpetrator suicides were committed with a firearm. Shotguns were the most common firearm used. In only two of these cases was there a weapons seizure order in place at the time of the homicide.

There was documented evidence of prior domestic violence in less than half of the cases. The most commonly-occurring types of evidence found were prior threat of suicide or homicide by the perpetrator, prior calls to the police, and prior arrests for domestic abuse. Thirty-nine percent of cases had prior calls to police for domestic assault; thirty percent had a history of prior arrests for domestic violence. Ten cases had a current order of protection in place at the time of the homicide; seven of them were between the domestic partners.

In contrast to cases reviewed in prior years, the team noted there were more cases where domestic violence victims had used community domestic violence services (6 cases). In addition, twelve domestic violence perpetrators had participated in a batterer's education program and ten of them had completed it. Clearly, these findings indicate that just seeking and providing services is not adequate to ensure safety – more is needed to hold batterers accountable for their abusive actions and enhance the effectiveness of intervention efforts.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The team concluded several key findings and recommendations:

- **The most dangerous time for domestic violence victims is when the victim is preparing to leave or has left the relationship.** Victims of domestic violence leaving a relationship are at 75 percent greater risk of being a victim of homicide than at any other time in their relationship. All homicide or suicide threats need to be taken seriously, especially when there is a history of domestic violence. Safety planning and better lethality assessment, within the context of a supportive community, is critical for victims in this situation.
- **Domestic violence, especially when accompanied with homicide or suicide threats and when firearms are available, are some of the highest risk cases in the criminal justice system.** Prosecutors should be very careful when pleading down these cases because of the risk to victims. Judges should hold protection order violators more accountable by ordering additional treatment for batterers if they are not responding to treatment that is routinely ordered. Persons convicted of misdemeanor domestic abuse should be required to surrender firearms upon conviction.
- **Iowa law offers public safety officials clear options for intervening in these cases and whenever there are threats of death, they should use whatever means are possible to ensure safety for potential victims.** Friends and family members of the victim should be encouraged to contact law enforcement or their county attorney's office when they are aware of these threats.

The full report, as well as other background information on the domestic abuse death review team, can be found at http://www.idph.state.ia.us/bh/domestic_abuse_review.asp.