

Fatal Violence among Spouses in the United States, 1976–85

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Abstract: In this paper we examine patterns and trends in homicides between marriage partners in the United States for 1976 through 1985 using data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Supplemental Homicide Reports (FBI-SHR). We identified 16,595 spouse homicides accounting for 8.8 per cent of all homicides reported to the FBI-SHR during this 10-year period. The rate of spouse homicide for this 10-year period was 1.6 per 100,000 married persons. The risk of being killed by one's spouse was 1.3 times greater for wives than for husbands. Black husbands were at greater risk of spouse homicide victimization than Black wives or White

spouses of either sex. The risk of victimization was greater for spouses in interracial than in intraracial marriages and increased as age differences between spouses increased. From 1976 through 1985, the risk of spouse homicide declined by more than 45.0 per cent for both Black husbands and wives but remained relatively stable for White husbands and wives. Demographic patterns in the risk of spouse homicide were similar to those reported for nonfatal spouse abuse suggesting that the causes of spouse homicide and nonfatal spouse abuse may be similar. (*Am J Public Health* 1989; 79:595–599.)

Introduction

Intentional physical violence between spouses is a long-standing social problem not seriously addressed by researchers or policy-makers in the United States until the 1970s. The pervasiveness of violent events in marital relationships has since been convincingly documented.^{1–4} Relative to the prevalence of abusive behavior between spouses, however, little attention has been given to the physical injuries associated with such behaviors, and there has been no attempt to undertake a population-based study of spouse homicide. To help address this gap in our understanding of the public health implications of spouse abuse, we undertook an investigation of spouse homicides in the United States for the years 1976 through 1985 to determine the demographic patterns for the risk of being murdered by one's spouse, and document annual trends in the rate of spouse homicide.

Methods

We obtained homicide data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) for the years 1976 through 1985. On a monthly basis, state and local law enforcement agencies voluntarily report homicides and other major crimes to the FBI through the Uniform Crime Reporting Program (UCR).⁵ The term homicide refers to those offenses reported to the FBI as murder and non-negligent manslaughter, i.e., "the willful (non-negligent) killing of one human being by another."⁷ The classification of this offense is based solely on police investigation as opposed to the determination of a court, medical examiner, coroner, jury, or other judicial body. This study focuses on homicides in which the relationship of the victim to the offender was determined through police investigation as that of a legal or common-law husband or wife. We further focused on those homicides that police investigations categorized as being criminal (i.e., unjustifiable) and having only one offender.

Supplemental Homicide Reports (SHR) accompany UCR (Uniform Crime Reporting) reports on murder and non-negligent manslaughter include information on the sex,

age, and race of victims and offenders, the victim-to-offender relationship, the circumstances under which the homicide occurred, and the geographic location of the homicide. We analyzed data by race only for Blacks and Whites because the low frequency of spouse homicide among other races makes it difficult to identify meaningful patterns.

Population estimates used to compute homicide rates were obtained from published data prepared by the Bureau of the Census.^{6–15} Estimates of the "now married" population include only persons ages 15 years and older who were married for the first time, remarried, separated, or in common-law marriages. Therefore, this analysis was limited to homicides in which the victim was age 15 or older. Age-adjusted spouse homicide rates were calculated by the direct method of standardization,¹⁶ with the 1980 United States "now married" population as the standard.

Population estimates used to calculate homicide rates for interracial and intraracial marriages, and by spouse-age differences, were only available from the 1980 census.¹⁷ For categories of these variables, homicide rates were calculated by dividing the average frequency of homicide for the three-year period 1979 through 1981 by 1980 population estimates.

Results

In the United States from 1976 through 1985, 16,595 homicides involved persons killed by their spouse in the context of a single-offender criminal homicide (Table 1). The 16,595 spouse homicides exclude 340 single-offender homicides that involved an offender and victim who were divorced from each other, 193 homicides with multiple offenders, and 113 homicides that were classified as justifiable. These 16,595 victims constituted 8.8 per cent of all reported homicide victims in the United States during this 10-year period. In 98.6 per cent of these incidents, there was only one victim.

Sex, Race, and Age Patterns

The spouse homicide rate for this 10-year period was 1.6 per 100,000 married persons, with wives being at 1.3 times the risk of husbands (Table 2). Blacks accounted for 45.4 per cent of all spouse homicide victims. The rate of spouse homicide among Blacks was 8.4 times higher than that for Whites. White wives were at almost twice the risk of being killed by a spouse as White husbands, whereas Black wives had victim rates that were moderately lower than those for Black husbands. Age-adjustment of these rates left them virtually unchanged.

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TABLE 1—Number and Per Cent of Husband and Wife Victims by Category of Homicide, United States, 1976–85

Category of Homicide	Husbands		Wives		Total	
	Num-ber	Per Cent	Num-ber	Per Cent	Num-ber	Per Cent
Spouse Homicides						
Single Victim/Single Offender	7,105	43.4	9,262	56.6	16,367	100.0
Multiple Victim/Single Offender	10	4.4	218	95.6	228	100.0
Total	7,115	42.9	9,480	57.1	16,595	100.0
Ex-Spouse Homicides*						
Single Victim/Single Offender	131	40.1	195	59.8	326	100.0
Multiple Victim/Single Offender	0	0.0	14	100.0	14	100.0
Total	131	38.5	209	61.5	340	100.0
Other Spouse-Related Homicides*						
Multiple Offender†	147	76.2	46	23.8	193	100.0
Justifiable	107	94.7	6	5.3	113	100.0
Total	254	83.0	52	17.0	306	100.0

*These categories of homicide have been excluded from subsequent analyses in this study.
 †Includes three spouse homicides in which there were multiple victims.

Age-specific rates for Black husbands and wives exhibited a strong inverse association with age (Figure 1). Victim rates for Black wives and husbands peaked at 14.0 in the 15- to 24-year age category and then declined with age. Among Whites, however, age-specific spouse homicide rates did not decline consistently with age. Overall, racial differences in spouse homicide rates declined with age.

Spouse Differences in Race and Age

Of spouse homicides occurring from 1979 to 1981, 96.3 per cent occurred in intraracial marriages. Spouse homicides in marriages where the husband was Black and the wife was White constituted 1.4 per cent of the total, and marriages where the husband was White and the wife was Black accounted for 0.5 per cent. Spouse homicide incidence rates were 7.7 times higher in interracial marriages relative to intraracial marriages. The patterns in this risk varied by race and sex. White husbands, White wives, and Black wives were at greater risk of being killed by a spouse in an interracial than an intraracial marriage, whereas Black husbands were at less risk (Table 3).

The risk of spouse homicide victimization for both husbands and wives increased as the age difference between husbands and wives increased. Among couples where the husband was two or more years younger than the wife, the spouse homicide rate was 5.0 per 100,000 compared with 2.6 among couples whose ages were within 1 year of each other and 3.6 among those couples where the wife was two or more years younger than the husband. This positive association between the risk of spouse homicide victimization and spouse age differences held for husbands and wives of both races

TABLE 2—Spouse-Victim Homicide Rates* by Race of Victim for Husbands and Wives, United States, 1976–85

Race	Husbands		Wives		Total
	Rate	Number	Rate	Number	
White	0.7	10	1.3	14	1.0
Black	9.7	10	7.1	71	8.4
Total	1.4	14	1.8	18	1.6

*Rates are per 100,000 married persons.
 Note: Excluded are 26 homicides for which information on race of victim was missing and 270 homicides occurring among victims of races other than White or Black.

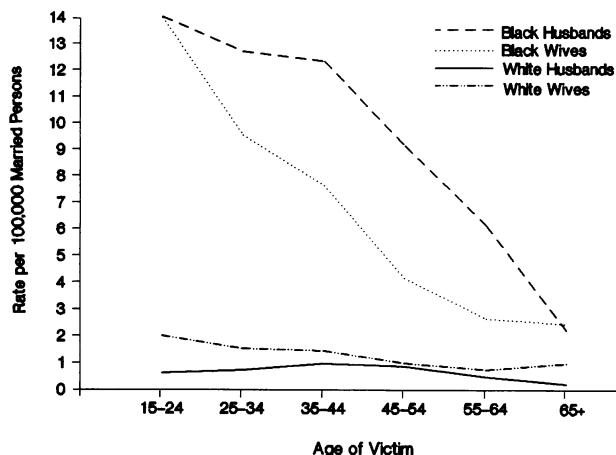


FIGURE 1—Spouse-Victim Homicide Rates by Race and Age for Husbands and Wives, United States, 1976–85

(Figure 2). This association also held regardless of the victim's or offender's age at the time of the homicide.

Weapon Involvement and Circumstantial Characteristics

Firearms were used in the perpetration of 71.5 per cent of spouse homicides from 1976 to 1986. Wife and husband victims were almost equally likely to have been killed by a firearm (71.0 per cent versus 72.2 per cent). Husband victims, however, were more likely to have been killed by a cutting instrument than wife victims (24.7 per cent versus 12.1 per cent), whereas wife victims were more likely to have been bludgeoned to death (11.8 per cent versus 1.6 per cent). White spouses were more likely to have been killed with a firearm than Black spouses. Among White victims, 83.2 per cent of the husbands and 72.5 per cent of the wives were killed with a firearm as compared to 63.9 per cent of Black husbands and 69.4 per cent of Black wives.

Arguments were noted as the circumstance most immediately associated with the killing in 67.2 per cent of spouse homicides. Arguments were more likely to be associated with the killing of husbands than wives (76.0 per cent versus 60.7 per cent) and the killing of Black spouses compared with White spouses (76.7 per cent versus 59.8 per cent).

TABLE 3—Rate† and Number* of Spouse-Victim Homicide by Racial Composition of Marriage for Husbands and Wives, United States, 1980

Race/Sex of Victim	Racial Composition of Marriage		Risk Ratio
	Interracial	Intraracial	
Husbands			
White	17.1 (14)	0.8 (1,002)	21.4
Black	8.9 (25)	12.2 (1,252)	0.7
Wives			
White	17.4 (49)	1.4 (1,784)	12.4
Black	13.4 (11)	9.6 (985)	1.4

*The number of homicides reported in parentheses under each homicide rate represents the frequency of homicides for a three-year period (1979–81). To calculate rates for this table the average annual frequency for the three-year period was divided by population estimates for 1980.

†Rates are per 100,000 married couples.
 Note: Excluded are 10 homicides for which information on race of victim was missing and 74 homicides occurring among victims of races other than White or Black.

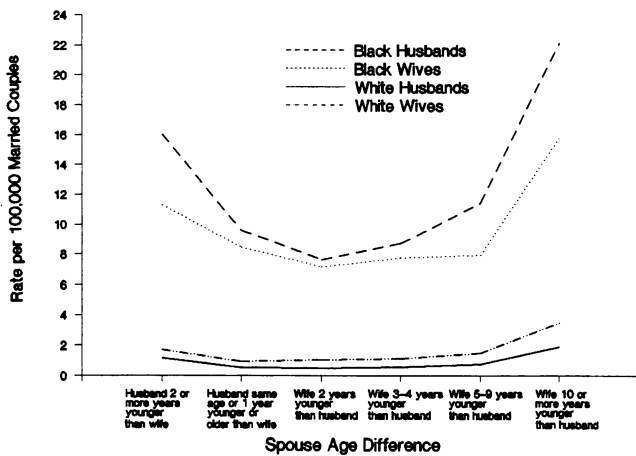


FIGURE 2—Spouse-Victim Homicide Rates by Spouse Age Differences and Race for Husbands and Wives, United States, 1980

Yearly Trends

Between 1976 and 1985, the spouse homicide rate dropped by 31.6 per cent from 1.9 per 100,000 married persons in 1976 to 1.3 in 1985. This decline in victimization rates was more dramatic for husbands than wives. The spouse homicide rate for husbands declined by 43.5 per cent; the rate for wives declined by 17.0 per cent.

When spouse homicide rates are further broken down by race, it becomes evident that the decline noted in the overall rate is almost entirely attributable to declines in the rates for Black husbands and wives. From 1976 to 1985, the spouse homicide rate for Black husbands declined by 52.0 per cent from 12.7 to 6.1, and the rate for Black wives declined by 45.8 per cent from 9.6 to 5.2 (Figure 3). In contrast, the rate for White husbands did not exhibit a consistent time trend, although from the beginning to the end of this 10-year period it declined from 0.7 to 0.5 per 100,000. The rate for White wives increased negligibly from 1.2 to 1.3 per 100,000. The risk of spouse homicide victimization for Black husbands relative to White husbands declined from 18.1 in 1976 to 12.2 in 1985. Similarly, the risk for Black wives relative to White wives declined from 8.0 in 1976 to 4.0 in 1985. Age-

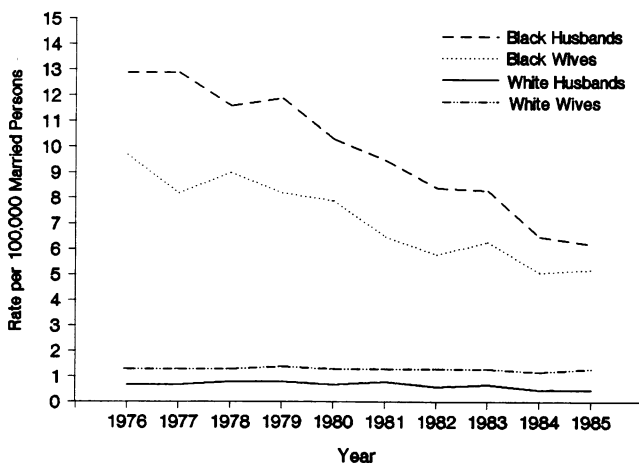


FIGURE 3—Spouse-Victim Homicide Rates by Race for Husbands and Wives, United States, 1976-85

adjustment of these rates left the annual trends virtually unchanged.

Discussion

The finding that husbands and wives were nearly equal in the risk of spouse homicide victimization is also apparent in some studies of nonfatal spouse abuse. In both the 1976 and 1985 national family violence surveys, husbands and wives were at very similar risks of being physically abused by their spouses.^{1,2} Other studies have reported similar findings.^{4,18-21} Studies relying on police statistics, however, generally report that in most cases of nonfatal spouse abuse known to police the victims are women.²²⁻²⁴

Violent behavior by wives directed at their husbands may reflect acts of self-defense or retribution. Studies of homicides between intimates show that they are often preceded by a history of physical abuse directed at the women^{25,26} and several studies have documented that a high proportion of women imprisoned for killing a husband had been physically abused by their spouses.^{27,28} In a study comparing battered women who had killed their partners with abused women who had not killed their partners, Browne²⁹ found that the frequency and severity of wife abuse was associated with homicide. The weight of available evidence suggests that often wives kill their husbands in the context of a history of wife abuse.

Blacks had substantially higher spouse homicide rates and different patterns of risk than Whites. The risk of nonfatal husband and wife abuse has also been reported to be higher among Blacks than Whites.^{1,30} Racial differences in the risk of spouse homicide, however, may only be a reflection of socioeconomic factors. Previous homicide research has demonstrated that socioeconomic factors are more important than race in explaining variations in homicide rates across aggregate units of analysis (e.g., states and cities).³¹⁻³³ Furthermore, other research indicates that variations in homicide rates among family and acquaintances may be more sensitive to socioeconomic factors than homicide rates among strangers.^{34,35}

The strong inverse association found between age and the risk of spouse homicide for Black husbands and wives, but not for White husbands and wives, is a new finding. Research on nonfatal spouse abuse has also indicated an inverse association between age and risk,¹ but this finding has not been broken down by race. These patterns within Black marriages may reflect the well established association between violence and youth found in our society.¹ In addition, violent marriages may be more likely to dissolve through divorce, separation, or death than nonviolent marriages, thus reducing the chances that they would be as prevalent among older as younger couples.¹

Differences between the race and age of spouses were found to be associated with a higher risk of homicide victimization. Although the risk of nonfatal spouse abuse has not been examined by differences in race or age, spouses in mixed religion marriages and wives in marriages where their educational or occupational level is high relative to their husband have been found to be at greater risk of physical abuse than spouses and wives in marriages without such differences.^{1,20,36,37} It may be that persons with different racial or generational backgrounds bring very different outlooks and lifestyles to a marriage that may contribute to more conflict, greater stress, and, ultimately to violence. External pressures brought on by family ostracism or by people

outside the marriage, particularly for those partners in interracial marriages, could also contribute to stress and violence within the marriage.¹

Firearms were used in the commission of most spouse homicides. In fact, firearms were more likely to be used in spouse homicides than nonspouse homicides (71.5 per cent versus 60.5 per cent). The presence of a firearm in the home may be a key contributor to the escalation of nonfatal spouse abuse to homicide.³⁸

The risk of spouse homicide victimization declined between 1976 and 1985. This decline is almost entirely attributable to declines in the risk faced by Black spouses. Rates of severe nonfatal wife and husband abuse have been reported to have declined by 21.1 per cent and 4.3 per cent, respectively (Table 4).² These trends are in the same direction as those we found for spouse homicide. The decline in the risk of spouse abuse may be attributable to the spread of treatment programs and battered woman's shelters, the greater acceptability of divorce and changes in the structure of families (e.g., increases in age at first marriage), or to economic changes which may have decreased levels of stress on families.² These explanations, however, beg the question of why the decline in spouse homicide rates was limited to Black husbands and wives.

There are a number of actual and potential biases affecting both the number of spouse homicides and the estimates of the married population that should be considered when interpreting the results of this study. First, from 1976 through 1985 between 2 per cent and 4 per cent of the United States population was not served by law enforcement agencies participating in the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program.⁵ In addition, approximately 4 per cent of the homicides reported to the FBI through the UCR were not accompanied by a Supplemental Homicide Report (SHR) form, which contains the information used in compiling the computer file used in this analysis. A second potential source of bias results from the FBI's monthly reporting requirement. For homicides occurring immediately before the FBI reporting deadline, the offender-to-victim relationship may be unknown at the time a report is made. It is possible, therefore, that some spouse homicides are hidden in the "undetermined relationship" category. A third potential source of bias is law enforcement use of inconsistent or vague criteria in identifying common-law marriages. There is no

FBI reporting provision to apply a uniform definition for common-law status.

There are at least two potential biases in estimates of the population of married persons used in this study to calculate rates. Studies matching marital status as classified on death certificates with census records have found a tendency for widowed and divorced persons, especially between ages 15 and 44 years, to report their marital status to the census as married or single.³⁹⁻⁴¹ Meaningful differences in the self-reporting of marital status by race were not evident. Because of the large number of married persons between the ages of 15 and 44 years relative to the number of widowed and divorced persons, the effect of this bias on estimates of the population of married persons was judged to be negligible.³⁹ One other potential bias in estimates of the population of married persons concerns the ascertainment of common-law marriages in the census. Since the census relies on self-reports for information on marital status, respondents may define themselves as not married (i.e., single, divorced, or widowed), even though they may be in a relationship which is legally considered a common-law marriage.

Comparisons of data from studies of nonfatal spouse abuse to spouse homicide data presented here show a substantial degree of congruence between the demographic groups at high risk. Also, rates of both nonfatal and fatal spouse abuse show similar declines in the level of risk. These findings are consistent with the possibility that nonfatal spouse abuse and spouse homicide have a common etiology and that spouse abuse may escalate from less severe forms of physical abuse to forms that have a greater likelihood of causing injury or death. Thus, incidents of nonfatal spouse abuse and spouse homicide may be more appropriately viewed in the context of a series of violent events rather than as isolated events.⁴² Repeated exposure to violence is likely to bring victims into repeated contact with a broad range of health and social services. Thus, contacts of abuse victims with emergency rooms, law enforcement agencies, social services, and physicians may provide a critical opportunity to prevent further injury or even death.

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TABLE 4—Comparison of Changes in Spouse Homicide Rates* with Changes in an Index of Marital Violence between 1975 and 1985, United States

Violence Index	Year		Percent Difference
	1975/1976†	1985	
Spouse Homicide			
Wife Victim	2.00	1.70	-17.0
Husband Victim	1.70	.96	-43.5
Severe Violence			
Wife Victim	3800	3000	-21.1
Husband Victim	4600	4400	-4.3

*Rates for spouse homicide are expressed per 100,000 husbands or wives while rates for severe violence are expressed per 100,000 couples. SOURCE: Straus MA, Gelles RJ.² This index represent rates of nonfatal violent behaviors (i.e., kicking, biting, punching; hitting or attempting to hit with an object; beating; threatening with a knife or gun; or using a knife or gun).

†The spouse homicide rates reported in this table pertain to the year 1976, but the rates for the index of severe violence pertain to 1975.

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May Conference on "Meaning of the Holocaust for Bioethics"

The Center for Biomedical Ethics at the University of Minnesota will sponsor a conference on the "Meaning of the Holocaust for Bioethics," May 17-19, 1989, at the Radisson University Hotel in Minneapolis. Major themes include medical experimentation in the Third Reich, eugenics and euthanasia, the evolution of Nazi biomedical policies, the ethical status of Nazi research results, and analogies from the Nazi era in contemporary ethical debates.

Speakers include: Arthur L. Caplan (Director of the Center for Biomedical Ethics at the University of Minnesota), Jay Katz (Yale University), George Annas (Boston University), Robert Pozos (University of Washington), Benno Muller-Hill (University of Cologne), Peter Rossel (University of Copenhagen), Ivanyushkin Ye (Soviet Academy of Sciences), Ruth Macklin (Albert Einstein College of Medicine), and William Seidelman (McMaster University).

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