

1.2 PATTERNS IN FEMICIDE OF OLDER WOMEN IN ONTARIO, CANADA, 1974-2012

Myrna Dawson, University of Guelph, Ontario/Canada

Myrna Dawson is a Professor and Canada Research Chair in Public Policy in Criminal Justice and Director of the Centre for the Study of Social and Legal Responses to Violence (CSSLRV), College of Social and Applied Human Sciences, University of Guelph. She is also Co-Director of the Canadian Domestic Homicide Prevention Initiative. Her research focuses on trends/patterns in and social/legal responses to violence with emphasis on violence against women and femicide.

In June 2017, a former nurse in Ontario, Canada, was sentenced to life for eight murders of elderly nursing home residents. Now regarded as one of the most prolific serial killers in Canadian history, her case highlighted how the elderly are vulnerable to various forms of victimisation, a phenomenon often neglected in violence prevention research. The gender distribution of her victims – nine women and five men – is consistent with existing research that show elderly women are more likely to be victims of abuse than elderly men – not surprising given women also tend to live longer, but often do so in poverty with chronic health/disability issues, isolation and other factors exacerbating their marginalisation (Yan and Brownell, 2015). However, in contrast to the above case and similar to women's experiences of abuse early in their life course, elderly women are more at risk from those they know, particularly male partners, than from acquaintances, strangers, or professional caregivers. This is also true with respect to the most extreme form of violence against women – femicide – although little is currently known about patterns in femicide of older women. Given the increasing aging population and, as a result, the growing population at risk, it is necessary to begin to understand these crimes to better inform the development of appropriate preventions.

To address this gap, the current population-based study draws from data documenting femicide in Canada's most populous province between 1974 and 2012 collected from official data sources.¹ Patterns in killings of older women in Ontario are described and compared to femicides involving their younger counterparts.² To identify the best

approaches to violence prevention for older women, it is important to understand, not only patterns in their own victimisation, but also how the characteristics and circumstances of their deaths might differ (or not) from femicides that involve younger women. The total sample analysed comprised 2,025 femicides: 17% or 335 victims were aged 60 and older and 83% or 1,690 cases involved younger women aged 18 to 54 years.³ As such, almost one in five femicides involved older women.

As described below, there were more differences than similarities in the killings of older and younger femicide victims across most of the characteristics examined (see also Table 1 and 2). In many instances, this stems in part from the two groups of femicide victims being at different life stages and/or from changing relationship trends in society that would arguably be more evident among younger victims. Regardless of the reason for these differences, understanding how their deaths differ can contribute to our knowledge base about factors that exacerbate the risk of femicide for older women particularly and provide information needed to develop more nuanced and appropriate intervention and prevention measures for this group of women.

examined. In this sample, missing information ranged from none missing to 80% missing. As such, the analysis focused primarily on those variables for which information was available in more than 50% of the cases, focusing on valid percentages. However, it is argued that understanding patterns for some factors, even if based on limited information, can contribute to more focused interventions because, when comparing two groups for which missing information is similar, differences in patterns can still be identified. As such, percentages for cases with information only are reported below for prior criminal record and prior psychiatric history for victims and perpetrators, but should be seen as minimum estimates only.

3 The sample is restricted to those aged 18 and older to compare the killings of younger and older adult women.

1 Data sources for the ongoing study include coroners' data, police/prosecutor files, court reports and media sources.

2 As is often the case when using official data sources, missing information varies depending upon the characteristics being

Table 1: Victim and perpetrator characteristics and type of victim-perpetrator relationship in cases involving older and younger femicide victims (Ontario, 1974-2012)

Variables	Older Women (N=335)	Younger Women (N=1,690)
<i>Victim characteristics</i>		
Age (mean)	72 years	35 years
Married and/or living with a partner	57%	55%
Widowed	32%	2%
Divorced/separated	8%	21%
Single/never married	3%	17%
Children/dependents	91%	78%
Employed, full or part-time	14%	62%
Unemployed	3%	17%
Out of labour force	84%	22%
White	77%	66%
Prior criminal record	< 1%	8%
Psychiatric history	9%	6%
<i>Perpetrator characteristics</i>		
Male	92%	98%
Age (mean)	48 years	36 years
Married and/or living with a partner	60%	53%
Divorced/separated	7%	26%
Single/never married	33%	21%
Children/dependents	76%	73%
Employed, full or part-time	22%	63%
Unemployed	25%	27%
Out of labour force	53%	10%
White	70%	64%
Prior criminal record – violent	10%	19%
Prior criminal record – non-violent	7%	13%
Psychiatric history	25%	12%
<i>Victim-perpetrator relationship</i>		
Current/former spouse/partner	34%	62%
Estranged partner	2%	20%
Parent	11%	2%
Other family/kin	12%	4%
Strangers	11%	6%
Friends	7%	4%
Housemates/roommates	6%	1%
Neighbours	4%	1%
Acquaintances	4%	4%
Other	11%	16%

Femicides of older women

Socio-demographic characteristics of victims

As shown in Table 1, among victims aged 60 and older, the average age was 72 years with the oldest victims aged 96. The average age for younger victim group was 35 years. For both victim groups, the majority were married and/or living with their partners (57% and 55%); however, as might be expected, the next largest marital status for older women was widowed (32%) compared to divorced/separated (21%) and single/never married (17%) for younger victims. The majority of both older and younger victims had children (91% and 78% respectively). Only a small proportion of older victims were employed in formal occupations (14%), but almost two-thirds of the younger victims were employed, fulltime/part-time (62%). Beyond the 3% of unemployed older victims, most were out of the labour force altogether (84%; e.g. homemakers, students, retired, disabled). While both older and younger victims were most often white (77% and 66%)¹, there were higher proportions of indigenous (10%) and visible minority populations (10%)² among younger victims.³ Although few victims had prior criminal records, significantly fewer older women had criminal records (less than 1%) than younger victims (8%). Psychiatric histories were also uncommon in both groups (9% compared to 6%).⁴

Socio-demographic characteristics of perpetrators

Among solved cases, 92% of the perpetrators were male in femicides of older women with an average age of 48 years whereas perpetrators in cases

involving younger women were almost exclusively male (98%) and significantly younger (36 years). Similar to their victims, most perpetrators were married and/or living with a partner (60% and 53%), but there was a higher proportion of divorced/separated perpetrators in younger victim cases. Single/never married perpetrators were significantly more common in femicides of older women (33%) compared to younger victims (21%). About three-quarters of all perpetrators had children.

While 22% of perpetrators were formally employed in older victim cases, a significantly higher proportion were working full- or part-time (63%) in cases involving younger femicide victims. Again, likely reflecting life stages, about five times the number of perpetrators were out of the labour force in older compared to younger victim cases. Like their victims, the majority of perpetrators were white (70% and 64%), but there were higher proportions of indigenous and visible minority perpetrators in the younger victim group (7% and 12%, respectively). Where information was available, one in 10 perpetrators (10%) who killed older women had a prior violent record and another 7% had non-violent records. About one quarter had a history of psychiatric treatment. In contrast, more perpetrators in femicides involving younger victims had prior records for violent (19%) or non-violent crimes (13%) compared to cases involving older femicide victims, but a much lower proportion had a history of psychiatric treatment (12%). Although differences were not as vast as some of the other characteristics, they remained significant.

Patterns in the relationship between victims and perpetrators

Victim-perpetrator relationships are often a key factor in understanding femicide and, although the proportion varies by world region, intimate femicides typically represent the majority of cases internationally. Consistent with this trend, the majority of femicides of older women were intimate femicides (34%), but typically these involved current partners (32%) rather than former partners (2%). In contrast, there were two striking differences in the proportion of intimate femicides among younger femicide victims. First, almost twice as many younger victims (62%) were killed by current/former partners compared to older victims (34%)

¹ We acknowledge that this captures a diverse group of women; however, consistent with other research, data on race/ethnic identity is problematic and inconsistent, precluding more refined race/ethnic comparisons.

² Used by Statistics Canada and defined by the Employment Equity Act, the term “visible minority” refers to “persons, other than Aboriginal/indigenous peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour” and consist mainly of the following groups: Chinese, South Asian, Black, Arab, West Asian, Filipino, Southeast Asian, Latin American, Japanese, and Korean (see <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/eng/concepts/definitions/minority01>).

³ These distributions are not shown in Table 1.

⁴ It is important to underscore once again that these two variables – criminal record and psychiatric history – were missing information in more than half the cases so numbers are underestimated.

Second, while both younger and older victims were more likely to be killed by current partners (42% and 32% respectively), younger victims were 10 times more likely to be killed by estranged partners than older victims (20% and 2% respectively). Other relationship types that were common among older victims: one in 10 perpetrators (11%), primarily male (94%), were children of the victims as well as other kin (12%) and strangers (11%). These relationships were less common among younger femicide victims as shown in Table 1.

Table 2: Characteristics of incident and court outcomes, older and younger femicide victims (Ontario, 1974-2012)

Variables	Older Women (N=335)	Younger Women (N=1,690)
<i>Characteristics of the incident</i>		
Only victim	77%	80%
Lone perpetrator	98%	95%
No witnesses	76%	65%
Child witnesses	3%	13%
Other family witnesses	4%	4%
Non-family, neighbour witnesses	7%	9%
Other victims as witnesses	3%	2%
Other witnesses	7%	7%
Victim substance use	15%	38%
Perpetrator substance use	42%	54%
Victim killed in home	80%	65%
Victim killed in bedroom of home	24%	20%
Victim killed in institution	7%	<1%
Method, beating	26%	17%
Method, stabbing	25%	30%
Method, shooting	21%	26%
'Overkill' present	37%	39%
Evidence of sexual violence	13%	24%
Victim left nude/partially unclothed	19%	35%
Perpetrator tried to conceal crime	15%	24%
Perpetrator remained at scene	57%	41%
Perpetrator confessed to crime	92%	85%
Perpetrator commit suicide	26%	20%
Perpetrator attempted suicide	6%	8%
Case remains unsolved	7%	7%
First degree murder charged laid	39%	51%
Second degree murder charge laid	46%	41%
Plead guilty to the charge	60%	51%
Conviction, first-degree murder	12%	18%
Conviction, second-degree murder	28%	42%
Conviction, manslaughter	29%	26%
Conviction, other (e.g. neglect)	1%	3%
Not criminally responsible	30%	11%
Average sentence length	12 years	14 years

Characteristics of the femicide incident and patterns in court outcomes

Table 2 shifts the focus to incident characteristics beginning with the number of victims and perpetrators that were typically involved in femicides. Results show that femicide victims were most often the sole victim (77% and 80%) and their cases almost exclusively involved lone perpetrators (98% and 95%). Although not common in either group, witnesses were more often present for older rather than younger femicide victims. When witnesses were present, children were more than four times as likely to be witnesses in femicides of younger victims, suggesting that adult witnesses may be more likely in cases involving older victims. While only 15 percent of older women were known to be using substances, primarily alcohol, at the time of their killing, almost three times as many perpetrators had been (42%). In contrast, substance use appeared to play a greater role in cases involving younger femicide victims with more than twice as many victims (38%) and a much greater proportion of perpetrators (54%) using alcohol/drugs at the time of the killing. Both older and younger victims were most likely to be killed in their homes or one they shared with their killers (80% and 65%) and most often the killings occurred in their bedrooms. However, significantly fewer young women were killed at home, suggesting that their deaths may be more public in nature. Although proportions were small for both groups, compared to older women, fewer younger victims were killed in institutions. Among older victims, most were killed in nursing homes, hospitals, or group homes.

Older victims were most often beaten to death (26%) or stabbed (25%) and one in five were shot (21%; primarily long guns). In contrast, the most common method used in the killing of younger victims was stabbings (30%), followed by shootings (26%) and then beatings (16%), the latter of which was significantly more common for older victims. Consistent with the concept of 'overkill', multiple methods (i.e. beating and stabbing) or repeated use of one method (i.e. multiple stab wounds) were almost equally likely in both types of femicides (37% and 39%). Although data were limited, there were significantly more cases that involved sexual violence among younger victims (24%) than older victims of femicide (13%). Similarly, there were more younger victims left nude/partially unclothed (35%), than

older victims (19%). Fewer perpetrators in femicides of older women (15%) attempted to conceal their crimes compared to younger victim cases (24%) whereas more perpetrators in older victim cases remained at the scene (57%) and confessed to the killing at some point (92%) compared to perpetrators in younger victim cases (41% and 85%). Finally, just over one in four perpetrators of older women (26%) committed suicide following the femicide compared to one in five (20%) of the perpetrators in femicides of younger victims.

Criminal justice responses to femicide of older women

Similar proportions (7%) of both groups of femicide cases remain unsolved; however, an examination of outcomes in the femicides that did not end in the suicide of the perpetrator demonstrates a clear pattern in criminal justice responses to killings of older and younger femicide victims. Consistent with other types of homicide, most cases in both groups resulted in an initial charge of murder, either first- or second-degree, but significantly more perpetrators who killed younger victims were charged with the more serious first-degree murder (51%) compared to those who killed older victims (39%). Further, while perpetrators of younger women were less likely to plead guilty (51% compared to 60%), they were still more likely to be convicted of murder, either first- or second-degree, but most commonly the latter (42%). In contrast, in cases involving older victims, convictions for second-degree murder (28%) and the lesser offense of manslaughter (29%) were common, but so too were perpetrators found not fit to stand trial or not criminally responsible by reason of mental disorder (30%). The average sentence length was 12 years compared to 14 years for those convicted in cases involving older and younger femicide victims, respectively.

Discussion

There is a dearth of reliable research on femicides of older women. This population-based study demonstrates that the lethal victimisation of older women differs significantly from that of younger women in the characteristics of those involved, the circumstances surrounding their deaths and the criminal justice responses. While some patterns are similar, there are significant

differences in the degree of variation in, or presence of, most of the variables examined. As argued above, some of these differences are attributable to different life stages or changing relational lifestyles more common among younger generations. Regardless, any variations in deaths of older and younger women remain important to developing more focused prevention efforts for both groups. In the sections below, some differences are highlighted to underscore various priorities for future research and prevention efforts. The section concludes with the identification of some significant data gaps that require more immediate efforts to improve reliability and validity of information.

Identifying research and prevention priorities for femicide of older women

First, while most perpetrators in femicide cases are married and/or living with their partners, who are also often their victims, a significantly higher number of older (33%) than younger women (21%) were killed by single/never married perpetrators. This finding contrasts with traditional theories such as opportunity perspectives which suggest that older women should have reduced risk of femicide, particularly from strangers, because their day-to-day activities are more concentrated in time and in their homes, arguably limiting contact with potential offenders. The current study found that older women are more likely to be killed by strangers than their younger counterparts, suggesting that opportunities are not restricted primarily to activities, particularly in public spaces, but also to vulnerabilities, in private and public, that may stem from “women’s ability to marshal resources for their own protection” (Gartner and McCarthy, 1991: 292). Research has shown that many older women often live alone, in poverty and isolation, and with chronic illnesses/disabilities and, therefore, are also likely more limited in resources and the ability to protect themselves. This finding also underscores the fact that, although older women still have more to fear from male partners than any other type of perpetrator, prevention efforts need to recognise the more varied relationships that older women often share with their killers – for example, strangers as well as their, primarily male, adult children.

Second, the results demonstrated that most victims and perpetrators in cases of femicide were white,

but this was significantly more evident among older victims largely due to greater proportions of indigenous and visible minority populations involved in femicide of younger victims. The reasons for this are unclear, but likely stem in part from two demographic patterns: (1) indigenous women and men are a younger population; and (2) the increasing diversity of the Canadian population, particularly in Ontario, which may be more clearly reflected in younger generations. Age has been linked to victimisation with rates being higher among young adults and declining as age increases (Perreault, 2015). It has also been documented that the indigenous population in Canada is considerably younger than the non-Aboriginal population (Statistics Canada 2015). As such, it would be expected that the proportion of indigenous victims and perpetrators would also be higher in cases involving younger femicide victims. Canada is also witnessing a rapidly-changing population in recent decades due to declines in fertility and increases in immigration. Changes in the population have not been experienced evenly across the country, however (Statistics Canada 2010). Ontario, and particularly its urban centre of Toronto, is one region that has experienced a growing diversity of racial/ethnic groups or visible minorities. Arguably this diversity would be more clearly reflected among younger populations (Statistics Canada 2010), so it would also be expected that victims and perpetrators in femicides involving younger women would also be more diverse as shown in this study. As such, prevention efforts that seek to reduce violence against women, and particularly femicide, must increasingly attend to the growing diversity of the population while recognising that older women are currently less represented among this group today, but will not remain so over time.

Third, there has been much attention recently to the role of separation and estrangement as one of the most common risk factors for intimate femicide and rightly so – it consistently ranks as one of the top risk factors worldwide although often conditional on other factors as well (Stöckl et al. 2014). This study shows that the role of separation/estrangement appears to be conditional depending on the age group examined because, on the surface at least, older women appear to have more to fear from current than estranged partners. It is possible that some of these cases occurred because the woman

stated her intention to leave or was trying to do so when killed and, as such, separation may have played a role. However, the same could be argued in cases involving younger victims, but they remain at much greater risk from estranged partners. For older women, then, prevention efforts that continue to, or more often, recognise that some women are currently in relationships with their abusers and may want – or need – to remain so are crucial. It has already been argued that prevention needs to recognise that leaving a relationship is not always the only, or preferred, option and this is perhaps more true for older women. However, further research would have to explore this contention further.

Fourth, unexpectedly and concerning is what appear to be lighter sentences for those who kill older femicide victims. First-degree murder charges were significantly more likely in cases involving younger compared to older victims. It might be argued that initial charges are less important than subsequent convictions and sentences if not for the fact that initial charges often determine later outcomes. For example, the higher proportion of first-degree murder charges may, in fact, explain at least in part the fewer perpetrators who pled guilty in cases of femicide involving younger victims. In other words, more serious charges may deter some from pleading guilty because, even when pleas are negotiated, penalties often remain severe. In addition, despite their greater likelihood to plead not guilty, perpetrators in cases involving younger victims were significantly more likely to be convicted of murder and to receive longer sentences than those who killed older women. One might speculate, in the Canadian context at least, that the greater presence of sexual assault in cases of younger victims can partially explain this difference because sexual assault as part of a homicide is to automatically lead to a first-degree murder charge. In fact, some researchers have suggested that the role of sexual violence in killings of women might explain what has been found to be a 'female victim effect (e.g. Richards et al., 2014). That is, penalties in cases involving female, rather than male, victims are often more severe which may have less to do with gender of the victim and more to do with the role of sexual violence as an aggravating factor. However, given the emphasis in much of this research on capital sentencing in the United States, until further research examines the role of sexual

violence in conviction and sentencing, its role in the perceived downgrading in seriousness of femicides of older women must remain speculation.

Finally, and related to the above, is the finding that mental illness is, or appears to be seen as, a more significant factor in femicides of older women. Although based on limited data, psychiatric histories were twice as common among perpetrators of older rather than younger women. Perpetrators in cases of femicide of older women were also almost three times more likely to be found not criminally responsible (or unfit to stand trial) compared to those who killed younger women. Given these patterns, future research should identify what relationships these perpetrators had with their victims and, if primarily male partners, what prevention efforts can be enhanced when perpetrators have sought treatment. In addition, health care professionals who may be in contact with older women with older male partners should be more attuned to the role of mental illness in increasing their risk of victimisation, particularly if the male is the primary caregiver (Salari 2007). However, more information about mental health is required before more concrete conclusions can be reached as discussed below. In relation to the perceived role of mental illness in criminal justice responses, the potential overrepresentation of perpetrators who were found not criminally responsible among femicide of older women should also be explored. What types of mental illnesses were evident? What evidence was presented to support the claim of not criminally responsible?

Addressing data gaps needed for informed prevention

The larger ongoing study from which the data for the current analysis were drawn are unique in the time covered – almost four decades – and in the number of variables examined (Dawson, 2016). Furthermore, in light of recent discussions about the importance of disaggregating data by, at minimum, the gender, age, and relationship of those involved (e.g. Walby, 2017), the level of detail provided for many of the variables examined is unprecedented. However, no data are perfect and this is particularly the case when drawing from official criminal justice data sources given that information is not collected with research in mind and, therefore, is often missing for many important social science

questions. As such, data collection efforts require more attention, and perhaps innovation, with respect to how one might collect more reliable and valid information as well as what we want to capture by doing so. Only two brief examples are provided below although many more are crucial to discussions of data reliability and validity when documenting trends and patterns in femicide.

Arguably providing the most potential for prevention efforts to reduce the risk of older women to femicide, more detailed knowledge about the psychiatric histories of those involved is needed. Even though data are limited, it is clear that those who killed older women had significantly greater histories of psychiatric treatment and, supporting this pattern, were also more likely to commit suicide following the femicide. Understanding whether there has been an official diagnosis, for what, and what level of treatment the perpetrator had received are important questions, particularly for those interested in prevention. In addition, if the victim was an intimate partner, whether she was fully aware of the mental health issues and/or had been provided information about her potential risk and how she might protect herself are key prevention elements to be considered.

Second, and not examined here due to the high proportion of missing data and the complexities involved in understanding this factor, more concerted efforts need to identify the motivations behind, or circumstances surrounding, the killings of older (and younger) women. A significant body of literature has shown that it is not possible to identify a priori motivation or intent for criminal acts (e.g. Campbell and Runyan 1998). Recently, however, given that several Latin American countries have established legislation identifying specific punishments for femicide and, in some jurisdictions, have established femicide as its own offense, efforts have been made to identify whether and what gender-based indicators can distinguish femicide from homicide. Specifically, the Latin American Protocol for the Investigation of Gender-Related Killings of Women (Femicide/Feminicide) documents in a detailed and comprehensive manner how a femicide might be identified, including gender-related motives. Further, with respect to precursors or motivations for older femicide victims, some research has shown that femicide-suicides among

older couples are more often premeditated, and motivated by ill health, compared to cases involving younger couples, in which the perpetrators may more often be motivated by jealousy, leading to a loss of control (Dawson 2005). While there are valid critiques of this ‘crime of passion’ argument which views complex acts too simplistically (Dawson 2006), it does underscore that different life stages may also lead to different motivations for femicide that require further exploration.

References

- Campbell, J. and C.W. Runyan. 1998. Guest editors' introduction: Femicide. *Homicide Studies* 2(4): 3347-352.
- Dawson, M. 2016. Punishing femicide: Criminal justice responses to the killing of women over four decades. *Current Sociology* 64(7): 996-1016.
- Dawson, M. 2006. Intimacy and violence: Exploring the role of victim-defendant relationship in criminal law. *The Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology* 96(4): 1417-1449.
- Dawson, M. 2005. Intimate femicide followed by suicide: Examining the role of premeditation. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 35(1): 76-90.
- Gartner, R. and B. McCarthy. 1991. The social distribution of femicide in urban Canada, 1921-1988. *Law & Society Review* 25(2): 287-312.
- Perreault, S. 2015. Criminal victimisation in Canada, 2014. *Juristat*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 85-002-X.
- Richards, T.N., W.G. Jennings, M.D. Smith, C.S. Sellers, S.J. Fogel, and B. Bjerregaard. 2014. Explaining the “female victim effect” in capital punishment: An examination of victim sex-specific models of juror sentence decision-making. *Crime & Delinquency* 62(7).
- Salari, S. 2007. Patterns of intimate partner homicide suicide in later life. Strategies for prevention. *Clinical Interventions in Aging* 2(3): 441-452.
- Statistics Canada. 2015. Aboriginal statistics at a glance: 2nd edition. Aboriginal Statistics Program. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89-645-X.
- Statistics Canada. 2010. Projections of the Diversity of the Canadian Population, 2006-2031. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 91-551-X.
- Stöckl, H., K. Devries, and C. Watts. 2014. The epidemiology of intimate partner violence. Chapter 6 in the *Oxford Textbook of Violence Prevention: Epidemiology, Evidence, and Policy*, edited by P.D. Donnelly and C.L. Ward. Oxford University Press.
- Walby, S. 2017. *The Concept and Measurement of Violence Against Women and Men*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- Yan, E. and P. Brownell. 2015. Letter from the guest editors: Elder abuse as a gendered issue. *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect* 27: 286-290.