

Harris County Death Review Team Annual Report

2010

This report compiles the work of the Harris County Death Review Team whose mission is to better understand the community and systems in which domestic violence occurs and perpetuates and to use this knowledge to influence the provision of targeted services and policy development.

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Harris County Domestic Violence Coordinating Council (HCDVCC)

Domestic Violent Death Review Team Report (DVDRT)

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Domestic Violence Death Review Team

According to the Family Violence Prevention Fund:

- On average, more than three women are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends in this country every day. In 2005, 1,181 women were murdered by an intimate partner.
- Of females killed with a firearm, almost two-thirds were killed by their intimate partner.
- Women are much more likely than men to be killed by an intimate partner. In 2005, intimate partner homicides accounted for 33 percent of the murders of women but less than four percent of the murders of men.
- Pregnant and recently pregnant women are more likely to be victims of homicide than to die of any other cause, and evidence exists that a significant proportion of all female homicide victims are killed by their intimate partners.
- Research suggests that injury related-deaths, including homicide and suicide, account for approximately one-third of all maternal mortality cases, while medical reasons make up the rest. But, homicide is the leading cause of death overall for pregnant women, followed by cancer, acute and chronic respiratory conditions, motor vehicle collisions and drug overdose, peripartum and postpartum cardiomyopathy, and suicide.

According to the Texas Department of Public Safety, one family violence incident is reported to a law enforcement agency in Harris County on average every 20 minutes. Furthermore, an estimated 250,000 women who are residents of Harris County are living in violent homes. In a 2001 study conducted by the University of Texas Health Science Center, in a primarily Hispanic Houston neighborhood researchers discovered a prevalence of domestic violence (20%) that is significantly higher than the national rate of 10.5-17.3%. The study further stated that children of these underserved families were at higher risk of poorer overall emotional health.

In 2003 the Domestic Violence Death Review Team (DVDRT) was established with the specific charge of reviewing family violence-related homicides and suicides in the Houston/Harris County area.

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Mission

The mission of the DVDRT is to better understand the community and systems in which domestic violence occurs and perpetuates and to use this knowledge to influence the provision of targeted services and policy development.

Goals and Objectives

- To conduct formal, confidential, and systematic evaluation and analyses of adjudicated cases of interpersonal violence occurring in Houston and Harris County, focusing on the flow of each case through the various agencies in the system to identify areas for improvement or strengthening of agency contacts and interagency response;
- To evaluate policies, protocols and practices to identify gaps in service within agencies and the community;
- To disseminate information on prevention strategies through an annual quantitative and qualitative report to the DVDRT, HCDVCC, and as required to the Texas Department of Family Protective Services (DFPS) and to the community at large;
- To promote cooperation, communication, and coordination among agencies involved in responding to unexpected deaths;
- To develop an understanding of the causes and incidence of deaths caused by interpersonal violence in the counties where the review team is located; and
- To advise the legislature, appropriate state agencies, and local law enforcement agencies on changes to law, policy, or practice to reduce the number of violent deaths.

The Texas Family Code defines family violence “as an act by a member of a family or household against another member that is intended to result in physical harm, bodily injury, assault, or a threat that reasonably places the member in fear of imminent physical harm.” The Texas Department of Public Safety reported 193,505 family violence incidents for 2008, and 196,713 incidents in 2009; this is an increase of 3.7% from 2007(189,401). In 2009 there were a reported 212,106 victims of family violence statewide.

Harris County reported 35,161 incidents of family violence in 2008, and 36,215 incidents in 2009. The Health and Human Services Commission of Texas reported that in 2009, services were provided to 84,878 victims of family violence by 91 different programs across the state. In the state of Texas there were 111 homicides related to domestic violence in 2009 with 29 homicides occurring in Harris County.

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DVDRT Members

Donna Amtsberg, LCSW
DVDRT Chair
Director, Family Violence Center
Northwest Assistance Ministries

Michelle Permenter, Assistant Director
Victim Witness Division
Harris County District Attorney's Office

Sgt. Debra Schield, Special Victims Unit
Victim Services
Harris County Sheriff's Office

Chris Green
Crime Victim Liaison
Humble Police Department

Cindy Kilborn, MPH
Chief Epidemiologist
Harris County Public Health & Environmental Services

Judith McFarland, RN, PhD
Perry Chair in Health Promotion and Disease Prevention
Texas Women's University—College of Nursing

Jamie Ferrell
Clinical Manager-Forensic Nursing Services
Memorial Hermann Healthcare System

Rhonda Gerson
Community Advocate

Cheryl Harvick
Texas Department of Family Protective Services

Terri O'Shea, RN, MSFS
El Buchanan, BS, BSN, RN, SANE-A
Forensic Nurse Examiners
Harris County Medical Examiner's Office

Becky Blasingame
Director, Victim Services
Aid to Victims of Domestic Abuse

Jane Waters, JD, Chief Prosecutor
Beth Barron, JD, Prosecutor
Jennifer Varela, LCSW
Family Criminal Law Division
Harris County District Attorney's Office

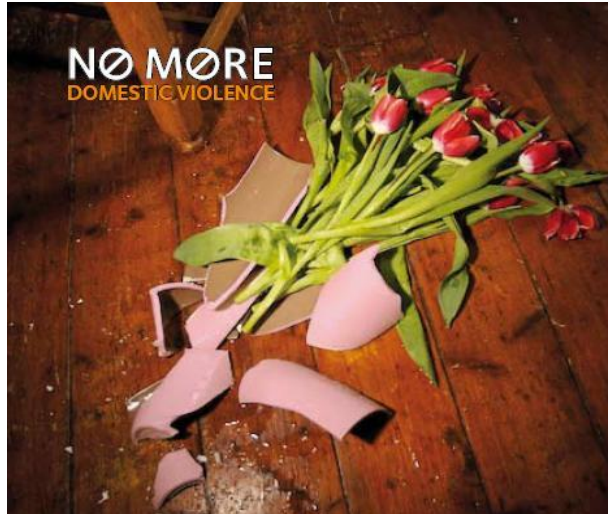
Lt. Joseph Levingston
Sgt. Ray Garcia
Sgt. Melissa Holbrook
Barbara McInnis
Homicide Division, Family Violence Unit
Houston Police Department

Barbie Brashear, LBSW
Harris County Domestic Violence Coordinating Council
Non-Residential Services Director
The Bridge

Toby Myers, EdD, LCSW, LPC
Shalom Bayit
Jewish Family Services



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The DVDRT began official retrospective case reviews in September of 2003. Cases for review are selected from adjudicated (trial completed) family violence homicide cases handled the previous year. By the request of the District Attorney's Office, a case list is requested each January. To date the team has comprehensively reviewed ninety (90) domestic violence related homicides. Team members meet once a month to discuss all aspects of a case based on all records available at that time. Members represent agencies that may have records concerning either the victim or perpetrator and bring those records for discussion.

Data

During this review period fifty-seven (57) domestic violence-related cases were reviewed. The data was collected and the following results shed light on the climate in Houston and Harris County.

Average age of Victim: between 30 and 39

Average age of Perpetrator: between 20 and 39

Number of female victims: 38

Number of male victims: 19

Number of female perpetrators: 11

Number of male perpetrators: 44

Race of victims: 22 Black, 14 Hispanic, 17 White, with 4 listed as Unknown/Other

Race of perpetrators: 26 Black, 14 Hispanic, 13 White, with 4 listed as Unknown/Other

Weapons used: 27 used a firearm, 13 used a knife, 2 used their hands, 1 used a hammer

Marital Status at time of homicide: 22 were married/common law

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Living arrangements at the time of the homicide:

- Twenty-four (24) victims were living with the perpetrator at the time of the homicide
- Two (2) victims had already separated and filed for divorce
- Five (5) had previously lived with the perpetrator

Recommendations

- Improve victim's access to domestic violence service providers; including but not limited to shelter services, non-residential services, law enforcement and criminal justice services.
- Promote knowledge in the community that every citizen is obligated to report suspected child abuse.
- Insure that all hospital Social Workers have adequate domestic violence service provider resources/ information for distribution to victims.
- Training for Family and Protective Services workers and private therapists to recognize signs of domestic violence and make appropriate referrals and interventions.
- Review what kind of interaction probation officers have with parolees and probationers in possible domestic violence situations.
- Involve psychological services personnel from area school districts in the review process, when appropriate.
- Stop or reduce harassing telephone calls placed by inmates in area correctional facilities.

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Case Scenarios

A few scenarios from the cases reviewed are provided here to illustrate the variety of situations and circumstances present in these homicides.

The decedent was a 37 year old female who was shot in the chest with a 9 mm handgun by her husband of 1 year. One day prior to the homicide the defendant had been served with divorce papers. Both individuals had children from previous relationships, however they did not have any children together. The defendant's children were in the home at the time of the homicide. Both the victim and the defendant had a history of alcohol abuse and had been drinking prior to the homicide. The defendant was sentenced to TDCJ for 15 years.

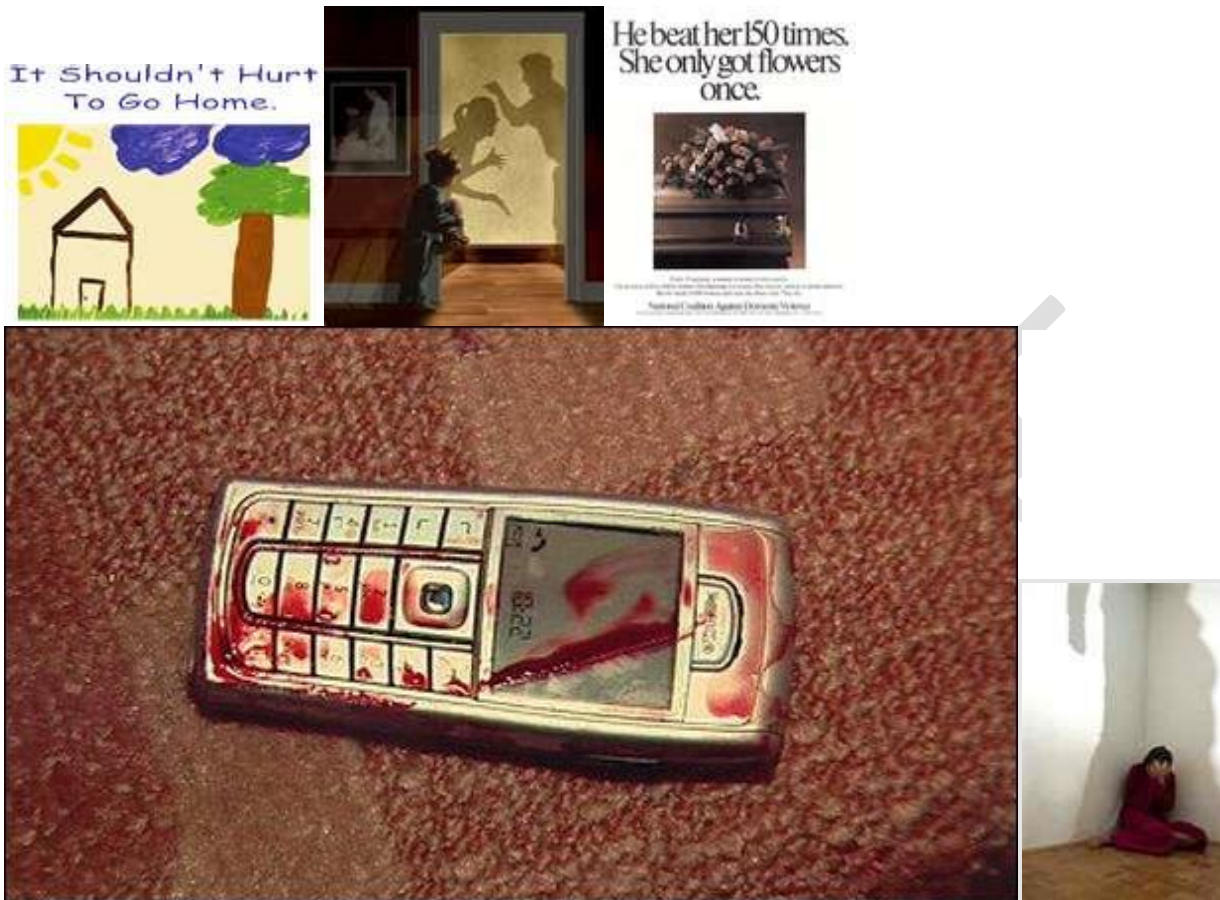
The decedent was a 31 year old female who was stabbed to death by her husband. A neighbor reported hearing the couple arguing and saw the defendant hitting the victim in the chest. The victim was in the neighbor's vehicle awaiting a ride to her work. The neighbor came to realize that the defendant had stabbed the victim as she sat in the vehicle. The defendant was sentenced to 35 years in TDCJ.

The decedent was a 44 year old female who was shot in the abdomen with a 40 caliber semi automatic by her husband. Family members reported that the couple had been arguing earlier in the day. Defendant was sentenced to 25 years in TDCJ.

The decedent was a 56 year old female who was shot in the chest with an assault rifle by her adolescent son. The defendant had no criminal history, however he did have a history of mental illness. A Sheriff's officer was also wounded upon arrival at the scene. The defendant took his own life before law enforcement could secure the home.

The decedent was an 11 year old boy playing fighting with his 14 year old brother. The decedent had found a loaded gun and the boys struggled and the gun discharged. The defendant was sentenced to 11 years in TDCJ.

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Resources – Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice

Emergency – Police / Sheriff's / Ambulance	911
Family Protective Services	1-800-252-5400
Harris County Constable, Precinct 4	281-401-6249
Harris County Sheriff's Department, Domestic Violence Unit	713-967-5743
Harris County District Attorney's Office, Family Criminal Law Division	713-755-5888
Harris County District Attorney's Office, Victim's Rights Division	713-755-6655
Houston Police Department, Domestic Violence Unit	713-308-1100
Humble Police Department	281-446-7127
Montgomery County Sheriff's Department	281-259-9174
Pasadena Police, Domestic Violence Unit	713-477-1221
Aid to Victims of Domestic Abuse (AVDA)	713-224-9911

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Shelters and Non-Residential Programs

Bay Area Turning Point	281-338-7600
Bridge Over Troubled Waters, Pasadena	713-423-2801
Focusing Families, Waller	979-826-0000
Ft. Bend County Women's Center	281-344-5701
Houston Area Women's Center	713-528-2121
Katy Christian Ministries	281-391-4504
MHMRA Crisis Clinic	713-970-4600
Montgomery County Women's Center	936-441-7273
National Domestic Violence Hotline	1-800-799-7233
New Horizon Family Center	281-422-2292
Northwest Assistance Ministries, Family Violence Center	281-885-4673
Safe House, Huntsville	936-291-3369
The Door, Humble	281-446-2615
Wellspring	713-529-6559