

hcdvcc

Harris County Domestic Violence Coordinating Council

Adult Violent Death Review Team

2015 Annual Report

"she really thought he loved her . . . she really thought that he loved her"

–Victim's Mother, Family Interviewing Project

*We dedicate this report to all the people affected by
Intimate Partner Violence—survivors, family members,
friends, co-workers, service providers, law enforcement and
especially those who lost their lives as a result.*

May we all strive to end violence.



This report would not be possible without the hard work and dedication of the Adult Violent Death Review Team members. The AVDRT would like to thank Captain Dwayne Ready and the Houston Police Department's Homicide Division. Without their support and cooperation our reviews would not be as comprehensive. The Team would also like to thank the families that shared the stories of their loved ones with us. Your kindness, strength and courage are unmatched.



January 2016

The year 2015 was an impactful year for the Adult Violent Death Review Team (AVDRT). We convened after a two year break which included several community assessments, the beginning of family interviewing, and many new team members. If this is your first introduction to the AVDRT, let me provide a brief history. Each month a group of passionate advocates and investigators meet to review domestic violence homicides/suicides that have taken place in the Houston/Harris County community. The purpose of these meetings are to conduct a formal, confidential, and system-wide review; with the end-goal of creating and sustaining change in the “systems” within the Harris County community. Community collaborations of this degree are difficult to duplicate; this team has been meeting routinely since 1996 and its members are committed to seeing the end to domestic violence homicides and suicides.

Homicides and suicides are not easy to read about; this is an important report and I encourage you to review this with care knowing that we as a community still grapple with the loss of life, the impact of violence on children, and the impact on those advocates who assist surviving family members during the most difficult time of their lives.

This report marks the end of my tenure as the Chair of the AVDRT. My ten years of chairing this team has been an honor and an amazing learning experience. I have been surrounded by professionals from many different walks of life, each bringing their own passion and expertise to the table. I have been forever changed by this work and these people.

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Houston Area Women's Center

Houston Community College System

Houston Police Department Homicide + Family Violence Unit

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Contents

Harris County Adult Violent Death Review Team Members	ix
Contents	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Introduction	1
Harris County Domestic Violence Coordinating Council Background	2
Intimate Partner Violence Fatality Review	2
Cases of Intimate Partner Homicide in Harris County, TX.....	4
Overview	4
Case Review Selection Process	5
Family Interviews	5
Limitations	6
Summary Data of Cases Reviewed	7
Fatality Details	7
Victim & Perpetrator Demographics	9
Victims.....	10
Perpetrators.....	10
Relationship	11
Living Arrangement.....	11
Age Difference	12
Children.....	13
Children Who Lost A Parent	14
Perpetrator History.....	15
Criminal History	15
Risk Factors	16
Sentencing	17
SUPPLEMENTAL REPORT FOR HARRIS COUNTY DOMESTIC VIOLENCE FATALITY REVIEW TEAM.....	Error!
Bookmark not defined.	
What are we learning as a team? What are the strengths of the Team?	Error! Bookmark not defined.
What are the challenges of the process?	20
What do we plan to change for next year?	20
What recommendations have we started to define for the final recommendation report?	Error!
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Harris County Domestic Violence Coordinating Council

Adult Violent Death Review Team

Introduction

Each year in the State of Texas, Harris County (as the State's largest county) has the highest number of women who are killed by their intimate partners. In 2014, 132 women in Texas were killed by their intimate partners. Twenty-eight of those deaths occurred in Harris County, (Texas Council on Family Violence, 2015). Harris County Domestic Violence Coordinating Council (HCDVCC) gathers information yearly related to service delivery from our local partners. We know that there are over 35,000 calls to law enforcement on an annual basis in Harris County, and more than 82,000 calls to domestic violence hotlines within the county (HCDVCC annual collection of data from domestic violence systems, 2012). Harris County is the third largest county in the United States with a population of more than 4.1 million people. It is estimated that 1 in 3 women are victims of domestic violence in their lifetime (Catalano, S, 2007).

"I never thought he would hurt her, up until the very end when they separated the last time. That's when I started believing he would actually hurt her, because . . . he had tried everything, there was nothing left for him to try."

—Victim's Mother,
Family Interviewing
Project

According to Futures without Violence:

- On average, more than three women are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends in this country every day.
- 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.

Harris County Domestic Violence Coordinating Council Background

Harris County has a 20-year history of working toward creating community collaborations that impact systemic change for survivors of domestic violence. The Harris County Domestic Violence Coordinating Council (HCDVCC) was formed in 1996, in response to identifying collaboration as an essential building block to establish a coordinated and systemic response. The efforts to coordinate have evolved out of frustrations with the fragmentation of the policies and activities of the various agencies serving victims of domestic violence. These frustrations have been expressed by victims, the community and the service providers themselves.

HCDVCC serves as the coordinated community response for domestic violence and plays a central role in increasing collaborations among service providers. Because there are more than 100 different organizations from various systems responding to victims of domestic violence, collaboration building was identified as an essential building block to addressing the barriers to increasing safety for victims, and decreasing violent deaths. HCDVCC is distinguished by its strong, volunteer board of local leaders, which include representatives from the Harris County District Attorney's Office, Houston Police Department, Harris County Sheriff's Office, Pasadena Police Department, and Executive Directors of various victim service agencies. HCDVCC is positioned to be an agency whose sole interest is working to create strong collaborative partnerships in the community that increase communication among services providers to effect positive change.

Intimate Partner Violence Fatality Review

As domestic violence work progressed across the United States, it became clear in many communities that there was a need to form fatality review teams; the purpose of which is to

review domestic violence-related homicide cases and identify needs within each community with the ultimate goal of decreasing the incidence of preventable adult deaths.

In 2001 the Texas Legislature passed Senate Bill 515 amending Chapter 672 of the Texas Health and Safety Code to allow for the formation of adult fatality review teams in Texas counties. In August of 2003 the AVDRT was designated as the official Harris County adult fatality review team by Harris County Commissioners Court.

Each month the AVDRT conducts system-wide reviews of selected cases of adult unexpected deaths that have been caused by intimate partner violence occurring in Houston and Harris County.

Goals of the DVDRT include:

- To conduct formal, confidential and systematic evaluation and analyses of adjudicated cases of family 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 build a database for analysis of aggregate population of deceased persons and perpetrators.
- To disseminate information on prevention strategies through a bi-annual quantitative and qualitative report to the AVDRT, HCDVCC, and as required to the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services and to the community at large.

she was high spirited, very high spirited, and very ambitious . . . and she had a heart, a heart of gold . . . all of a sudden, that spirit . . . came all the way down . . . if she walked out the door, she had to call and let him know that she walked out the door and I got to thinking, there is something not right with this . . . that's not a healthy relationship if you have to call every time you make a move"

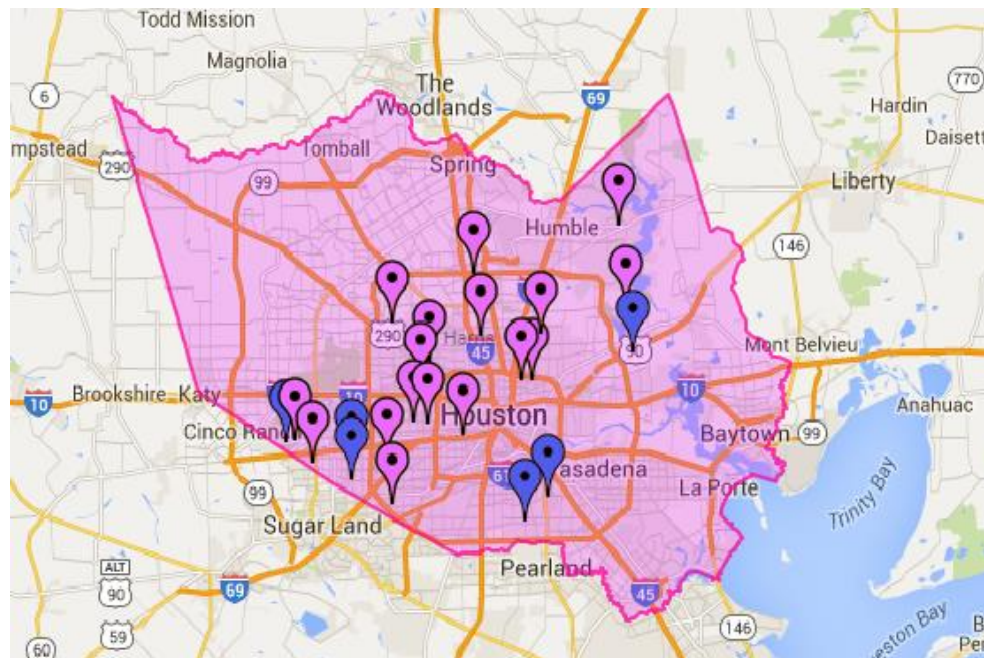
—Victim's Mother, Family Interviewing Project

Cases of Intimate Partner Homicide in Harris County, TX

Overview

The case review data described in the 2015 report includes information from 17 cases of intimate partner homicide in Harris County, TX from 2010-2012. The data is based on the number of cases reviewed by the team this year and does not reflect the total number of intimate partner homicides for the time period.

- 15 Cases Reviewed from 2012
- 1 Case Reviewed from 2011 [*^Evidence was presented to a Grand Jury who determined that the person acted in self-defense so the case was no-billed. Decedent was the main aggressor with a long history of DV.*]
- 1 Case Reviewed from 2010 [**Charges were dismissed because the body has never been found but the defendant was convicted on a Federal gun charge.*]



Harris County, TX: The purple markers represent the zip codes of the 17 cases we reviewed and the blue markers represent the 6 cases provide to us that we did not have time to review.

Case Review Selection Process

Intimate partner homicides are identified by the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator as being current or former spouses or current or formerly dating relationships. This definition includes all intimate partner homicides regardless of the gender of the perpetrator, including same sex couples.

The case list for the review process is generated by the Harris County District Attorney's Office. The list only includes cases where charges were filed by the police agency and accepted for prosecution by the Harris County District Attorney's Office. The list may or may not include murder/suicide cases. The total number of cases on the list to be reviewed by the team during this time period was 23. Due to time constraints only 17 went through the entire review process.

Family Interviews

In hopes of learning more about the lives of these victims and additional opportunities for interventions and system changes, we spent the better part of the year developing the process and policies for the inclusion of family interviews in our yearly review.

Of the 17 cases reviewed we only had contact information on 9 of the families, with most information being outdated and no longer available as most of the cases were 3+ years old. Of the 3 families that were contacted, only 2 agreed to meet with select team members. The third family did not believe their loved one's case was an intimate partner homicide, although case documents indicated that it was a same-sex relationship.

The family interviews provided insightful information into the challenges the victim and the family experienced leading up to the murder and the strength that has carried them forward since then. Not only did they provide us helpful details about the history of the violence in the relationship, but of the relationship itself, the family's perception of what was happening to their loved ones, and their reflections on what needs to change in order to prevent this from happening to others. We are humbled by the graciousness and openness of the families that allowed us to interview them and most of all we are awed and inspired by their strength and resilience.

“I was tempted to call him over, hit her myself and set him up . . . to just end the madness . . . for somebody like me to even start thinking like that, it has gotten really bad and you feel like there is no other way out . . . we’re just not like that, but us not doing something cost her life.”

—Victim’s Mother,
Family Interviewing
Project

Limitations

Our findings align with the current nationwide data available on intimate partner homicides, however, we recognize that the data we captured is only a snapshot of these homicides. Our review process does have several limitations, including:

Access to Relevant Case Information: Not everyone that we would like to be at the table is currently there. Our access to a case is limited to the information current team members are able to gather and share. While everyone at the table is open and honest with their information many unanswered questions remain.

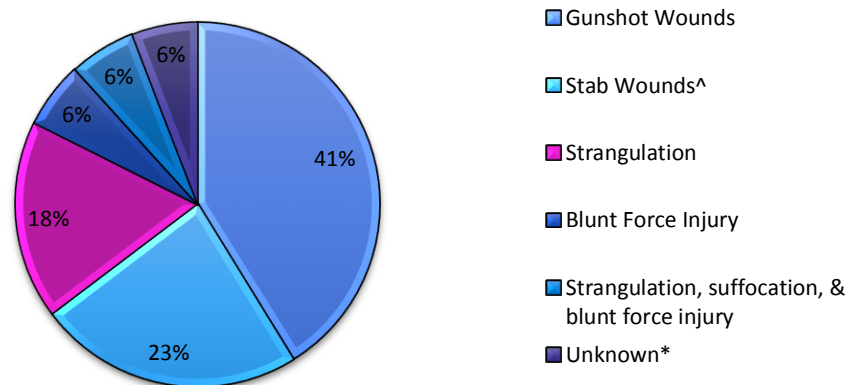
Accessing Data: The databases of team member agencies were not designed to pull data for the purposes of the review and can often be a cumbersome process for already time-constrained agencies and team members. There is additional data we would like to access for the review, but we must be cognizant of the time and effort each additional request places on team members and their agencies. Additionally, the State of Texas does not have a system in place to collect statewide and county level data on intimate partner homicides. A statewide tracking system would allow for easier access to data and information.

Access to More Current Cases: The majority of the 17 cases reviewed in 2015 were from 2012, with one being from 2010 and one from 2011. The District Attorney provides us access to cases that have gone through the first stage of disposition, meaning the defendants have pled guilty or were found guilty. These reviews have allowed us to identify gaps within systems and identify areas for improvement within our community. However, because these cases happened 3+ years ago, it can limit our ability to provide up to date recommendations as some issues we identify in the review have already been resolved by the time we reviewed the case.

Summary Data of Cases Reviewed

Fatality Details

Cause of Death



The majority of the homicides from our case reviews fall within three categories, with gunshot wounds resulting in two-fifths of the homicides (7 of 17), followed by more than one-fifth from stab wounds (4 of 17), and nearly one-fifth from strangulation (3 of 17).

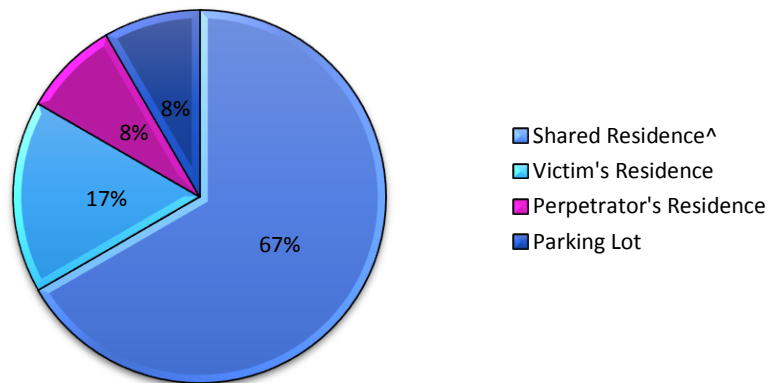
In two of the seventeen cases reviewed, the perpetrator committed suicide after killing the victim. In both cases the perpetrator was a male and the method of suicide was a gunshot to the head.

In nearly one-fifth of cases reviewed (3 of 17), there were collateral victims resulting in two deaths (victim's cousin, victim's boyfriend) and one non-life threatening injury (victim's friend's boyfriend). All were the result of gunshot wounds.

In the cases reviewed, more than two-fifths of perpetrators (7 of 16) had drugs and/or alcohol in their system at the time of the homicide (^2011 self-defense case not included).

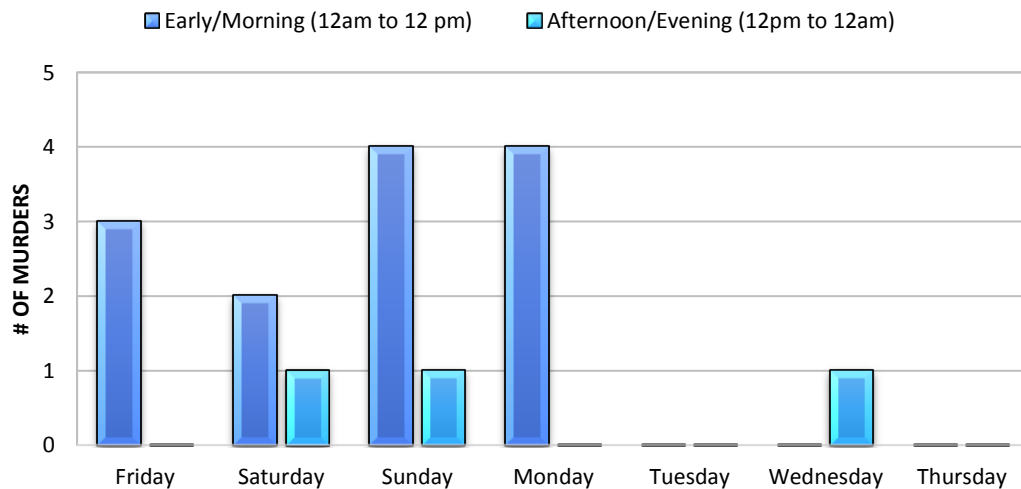
“When she died, it was at that point when the police asked me was she abused. ‘What do you mean?’ She had marks and things on her back . . . we never knew . . . the way that he did her, it was violent, it was very, very violent”
–Victim’s Mother, Family Interviewing Project

Place of Incident



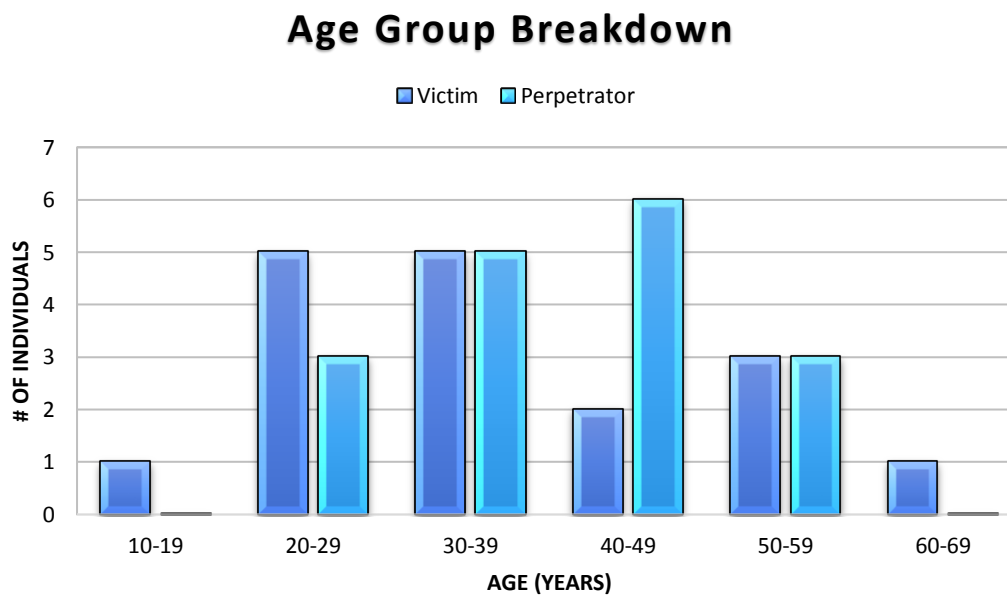
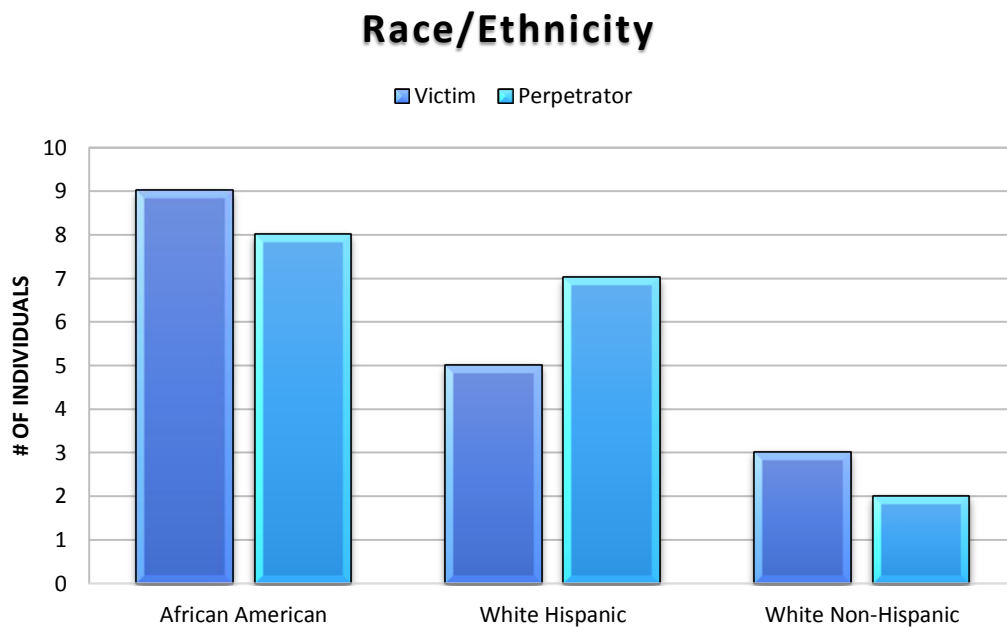
In more than half of reviewed cases (9 of 17), the homicides occurred at a shared residence.

When did the murders occur?

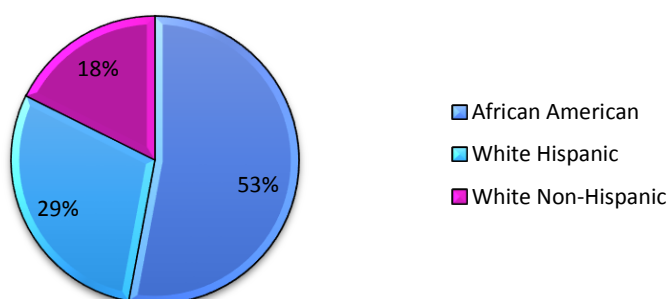


In eighty-eight percent of cases reviewed (15 of 17), the murders occurred between Friday and Monday. In more than three-fourths of the cases reviewed (13 of 17), the murder occurred between 12am and 10:30am. In nearly one-fifth of the cases reviewed (3 of 17), the murder occurred between 5:00pm^ and 7:30pm and in 1 case, time of death is unknown*.

Victim & Perpetrator Demographics

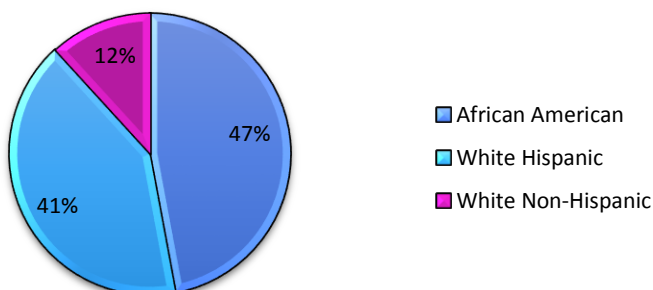


Race/Ethnicity: Victims



Victims Of the cases reviewed, more than three-fourths of the victims were female (13 of 17). Of the male victims, one was the main aggressor in the self-defense case. About half of the victims were African-American (9 of 17), while twenty-nine percent were Hispanic (5 of 17) and eighteen percent were White, Non-Hispanic (3 of 17). More than half of victims were between the ages of 20 and 39 at the time of the incident (10 of 17). The average age for a female victim was 32 years and the average age for a male victim was 56 years.

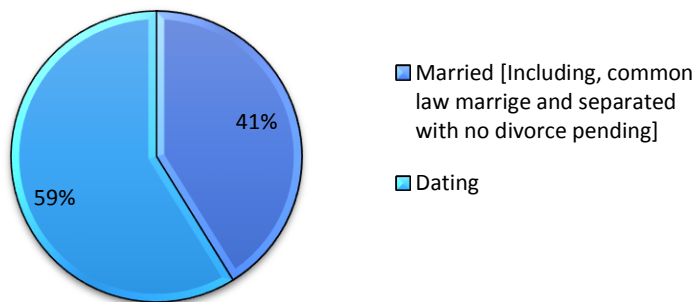
Race/Ethnicity: Perpetrators



Perpetrators Of the cases reviewed, more than four-fifths of the perpetrators were male (14 of 17). Of the female perpetrators, one was included from the self-defense case. Nearly half of the perpetrators were African-American (8 of 17), while about two-fifths were Hispanic (7 of 17) and about one-tenth were White, Non-Hispanic (2 of 17). About two-thirds of perpetrators were between the ages of 30 and 49 at the time of the incident (11 of 17). The average age for a male perpetrator is 39 years and the average age for a female perpetrator was 51 years.

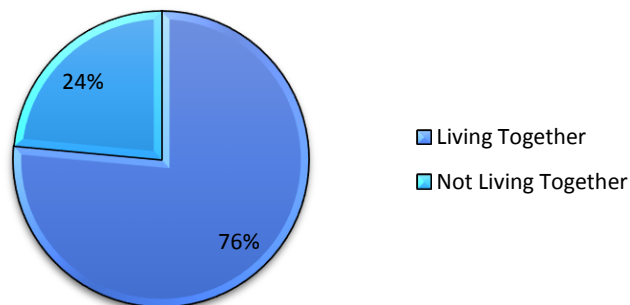
Relationship

Relationship Status at Time of Death



Relationship Status Of the cases reviewed, about three-fifths of relationships were dating (10 of 17), while about two-fifths were married (7 of 17), including common law and those who were separated with no divorce pending. One of the 17 cases was a same sex relationship.

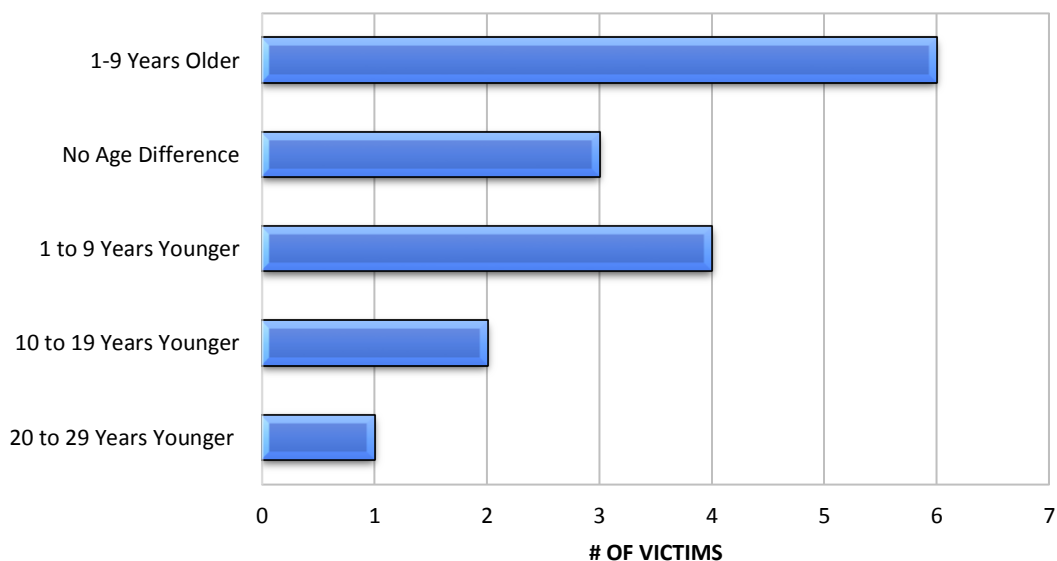
Living Arrangements at Time of Death



Living Arrangement In more than three-fourths of the cases (14 of 17), the victims and perpetrators were living together at the time of the incident.

“My daughter’s name wasn’t on the lease. People say they didn’t even know she was there. That’s how isolated it was.” –Victim’s Mother, Family Interviewing Project

Victims Age Difference from Perpetrator



Age Difference Nearly half of all victims were younger than the perpetrator (8 of 17). Females were on average 12 years younger than the perpetrator while there were no male victims younger than the perpetrator. More than one-third (6 of 17) of the victims were older than the perpetrator (including all male victims) and on average female victims were 4 years older and male victims were 8 years older than the perpetrators. Additionally, eighteen percent of victims were the same age as the perpetrator (3 of 17).

“he was such a normal good guy . . . you didn’t see this, at family functions, birthday dinners, whatever it was, you couldn’t have asked for a better guy . . . we didn’t know, we didn’t know”

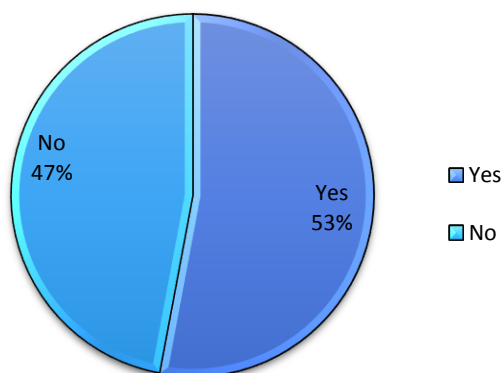
–Victim’s Aunt, Family Interviewing Project

“She loved him, yes she did, but I really think [she] probably would have ended that relationship long before she did if it had not been for her kids”

–Victim’s Mother, Family Interviewing Project

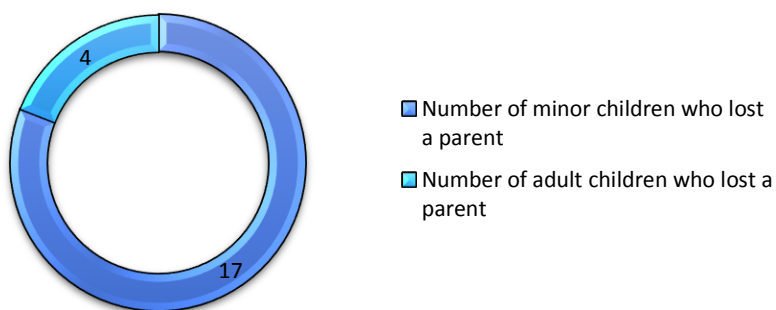
Children

Did the victim have children?



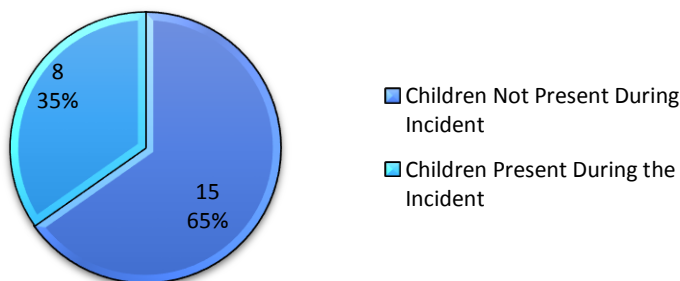
Of the cases reviewed, 9 of them included children, equating to more than half of the victims having children. In five of the nine cases, all children were in common between the victim and the perpetrator. In two of the nine cases, the victim had a child in common with the perpetrator and a child that was not the perpetrators biological child. In one of the nine cases, there were no children in common, but the victim had an adult child/children that was not the perpetrators biological child. In one of the nine cases, the victim had step-children who were the biological children of the perpetrator.

23 Children Lost a Parent



Children Who Lost A Parent Of the nine cases, 23 children lost one or both parents [**2010 case not included—number of adult children of victim is unknown*]. Nearly three-fourths of the children were minors (17 of 23) when they lost their parents and one-fourth were adults (6 of 23). Additionally, thirteen percent of children lost both parents (3 of 23), as the perpetrator committed suicide after the murder.

Children Present During Incident*

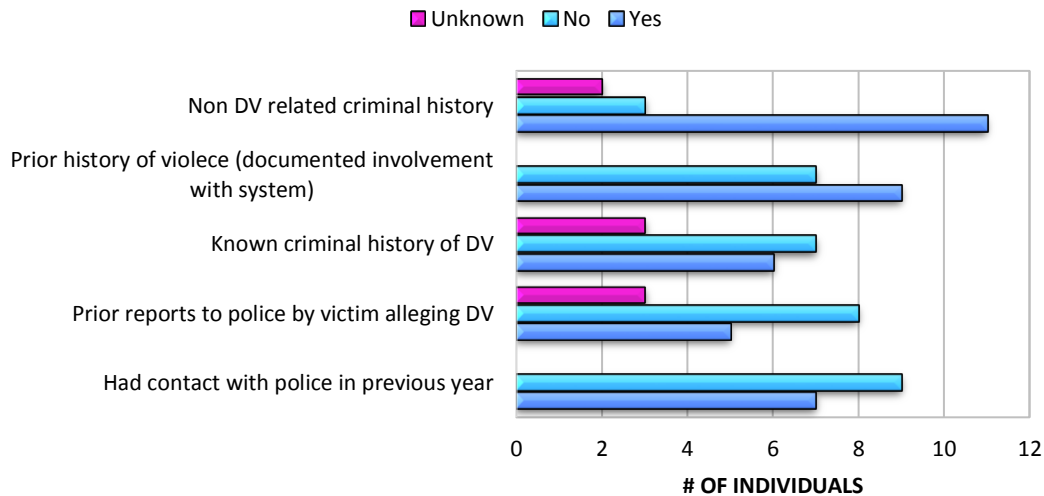


Children Present During Incident In four of the nine cases (44%), the murder occurred while children were present in the home, with 8 children being present at the time of the homicide (35%). Of the children present, half of them witnessed the event or discovered the body (4 of 8). **Based on 9 cases and a total of 23 children.*

"We [children] didn't talk, we were scared . . . what he would do to us . . . he would whoop us, but it wasn't like the normal whopping, it was like for real" –Victim's Daughter, Family Interviewing Project

Perpetrator History

Perpetrator Criminal History[^]

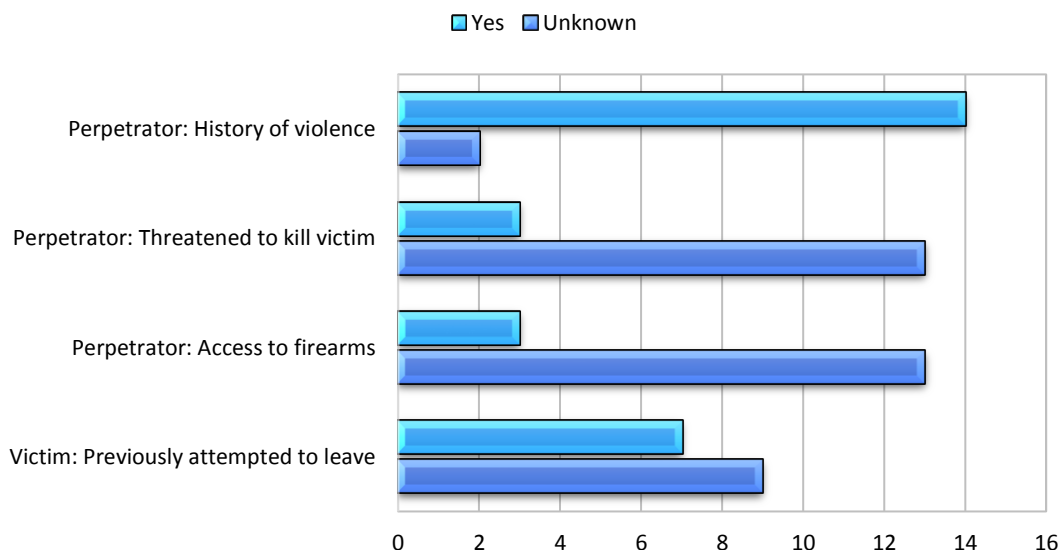


Criminal History About two-thirds of perpetrators had a non-domestic violence related criminal history (11 of 16). More than half had a prior history of violence shown by documented involvement with the legal system, law enforcement, or a protective order (9 of 16). More than two-fifths had contact with the police in the year prior to the homicide (7 of 16) and nearly one-third had prior reports to the police by the victim alleging domestic violence (5 of 16). Less than two-fifths had a known criminal history of domestic violence (6 of 16). [^]2011 self-defense case not included

“... he would time how long it would take the police officers to get there and he would always tell her ... ‘I could do anything to you and get away because it takes them x amount of time to get here’ ... it was as simple as his word against ours ... we still called them ... if something happened ... we need a record of how many times we tried, this boy has been stalking us”

—Victim’s Mother, Family Interviewing Project

Risk Factors[^]



Risk Factors In eighty-eight percent of cases, the perpetrators had a history of violence (14 of 16), while the other two are unknown. In more than two-fifths of cases, the victim had previously attempted to leave the abuser (7 of 16), while the other nine are unknown. In one-fifth of the cases the perpetrator had previously threatened to kill the victim (3 of 16) and in one-fifth of cases, the perpetrator had access to firearms (3 of 16), while the remainder of cases are unknown. In all of the unknown cases, we were unable to determine if there was a history of violence, attempts to leave, threats to kill, or access to firearms. [^]2011 self-defense case not included.

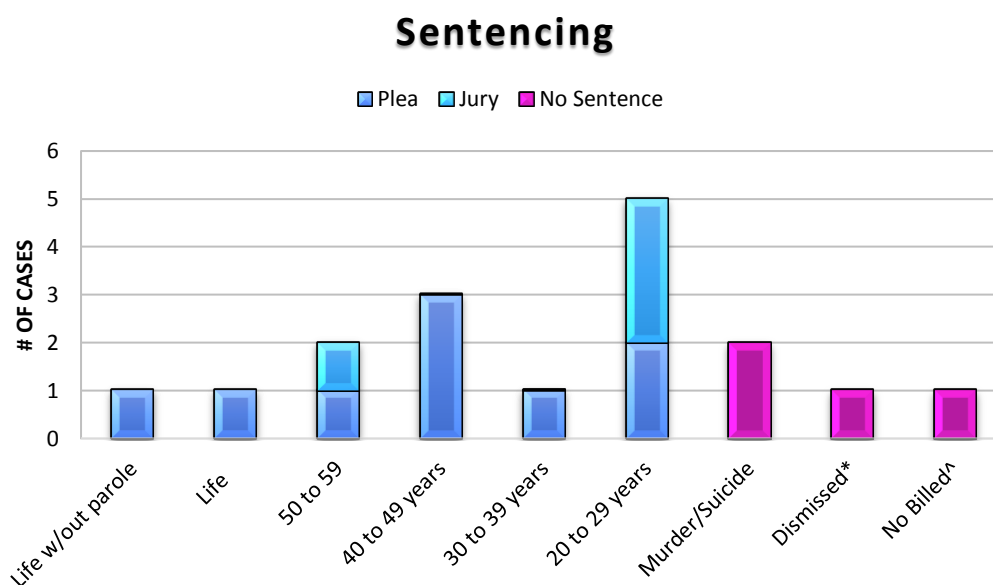
“I knew he had access to some [guns] because some of our family that we used to hang around and some of his friends. We probably did have some in the house, we didn’t know.”

—Victim’s Daughter, Family Interviewing Project

“we just didn’t see it . . . and I’m pretty sure and I believe in my heart of hearts that she told him ‘I’m ready to go, just let me go back to my momma, let me go home’ . . . I gathered that she was probably too weak to even run”

–Victim’s Mother, Family Interviewing Project

Sentencing



In the cases reviewed, sentencing ranged from 20 years to life without parole for the murder of an intimate partner. About two-thirds of charged cases resulted in a plea deal (9 of 13). The average sentence for a plea deal (not including the 2 life sentences) is 36 years. Nearly one-third of charged cases resulted in a jury trial (4 of 13). The average sentence for a jury trial is 31 years. In 2 cases, no charges were filed because it was a murder/suicide. In one case, charges were dismissed because the body has never been discovered and the defendant was convicted on a Federal gun charge* and in one case the evidence was presented to a grand Jury who determined that the person acted in self-defense so the case was no-billed^.

Lessons Learned About the Review Process and Our Community

- Family interviewing is able to provide invaluable information for the team related to the history and context of abuse experienced by the victims. Having the ability to share the family story strengthens the team's connections with stakeholders and each other, as well as leads to identification of systemic problems without judgement or defensiveness. It allows us as a team to think beyond our own discipline.
- Having a family interviewing protocol in place before conducting the interview provides structure and support for the process and keeps the interview on purpose.
- Providing the team with team evaluations at the end of each meeting is helping to keep the team focused on the process and purpose of the review, as well as allowing the team to define what is working well:
 - Communication
 - Participation from law enforcement
 - Feedback from different systems
 - Opportunity to discuss case with law enforcement and DA's Office
 - Having input from CPS about past of victims as well as offenders
 - Opportunity to explore context of the violence and other perspectives related to the violence
- Partnership with Law Enforcement and having investment from Houston Police Department and the Harris County Sheriff's Office is a true strength. Law Enforcement leads the case review process by providing a power point presentation that includes the 911 call, excerpts from the offender interview, a time line of the incident, and any known history of the relationship.
- Law Enforcement has shared that being able to "process" with the team allows them as investigators to think differently about the collection of information for future cases. One investigator said during a review, "I wish I would have thought about finding that out during the investigation."
- We are learning there is a need for follow-up, trauma informed services for families who lose their loved ones due to domestic violence homicide. We are also wondering if there is an opportunity to provide connections among families who have experience the loss of a loved one due to domestic violence homicide.
- The presence of Adult and Child Protective Services offers insight from both a victim and an offender perspective.

- The diversity, experience, and wisdom of the individuals on the team bring collective knowledge, wisdom, and insight to the case review.
- It has been enlightening to learn of the limitations due to protocols practiced by law enforcement, and this also brings knowledge of how that system functions and the role of law enforcement in homicide investigations that was not present to all members and systems represented on the team.
- There is great value in having Battering Intervention and Prevention Programs present as a team member.
- HPD has already implemented a change to the letters sent to victims from the family violence unit to include the National Domestic Violence Hotline as an additional resource.
- HPD changed their internal computer system for the ability to assign investigators to assault cases in a more timely way.

“... if you feel it . . . you know there’s things out of the ordinary, I would tell the parent or whoever, if there’s something out of the ordinary, if they stop calling . . . find out what’s going on . . . anybody, if you see something . . . if it’s out of the ordinary, say something . . nobody knew nothing, nobody called.”

—Victim’s Mother, Family Interviewing Project

Challenges

- The team is questioning the diversity of the team as members and as systems. Who are we missing? Who is not represented? We believe we have a gap in representation from communities of color, there is also a gap in representation from the faith community.
- There are continued limitations related to missing pieces from systems for the case review.
- The team still seems to work in isolation and seclusion and does not have a strong sense of community recognition of the work that we are doing. There seems to be a lack of visibility and awareness of the team and its role and function within a coordinated community response to prevention of domestic violence.
- There is a gap in state wide collection of data and there is no state wide sharing or coordination of information.

Changes for Next Year

- Work to increase diversity within the team
- Work to increase visibility and recognition of the work of the team
- Solidify the family interviewing process and work to increase identification of families for interviewing
- Increase focus on the process and what we are looking for as a team
- Create a process for retaining past protective order information (past the expiration of the protective order) in the NCIC and TCIC systems for law enforcement access at all times.

“When the woman say ‘I fear for my life’, believe it. Stop that ‘oh he just mad’ . . . if I’m calling you, if I’m taking the time to dial 911, please take it seriously . . . listen to these women, help these women . . . life matters”

–Victim’s Aunt, Family Interviewing Project

2016 AVDRT Recommendations

- Strengthen the lines of communication among agencies and organizations
- Identify additional opportunities and continue current efforts to increase public awareness of available resources for all survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence.
- Increase and strengthen our educational efforts to prevent deaths due to domestic violence
- Increase awareness of the societal imperative to recognize the magnitude of the problem and the difficulties associated with identifying, investigating and prosecuting domestic violence deaths
- Educate law makers, government and public officials and members of the criminal justice system about the increasing magnitude of mistreatment in our community, and the need for more rigorous action and increased funding to combat the problem.
- Develop a process for retaining information on previous protective orders after their expiration date in law enforcement databases. The information found in previous protective orders may provide helpful insight into the history of the relationship and identification of potential risk factors, which may assist law enforcement in their investigations.
- Advocate for the creation of a statewide repository for domestic violence fatality review information through state legislation.
- Advocate for a Statewide Conference for dissemination of information, sharing of lessons learned and increasing dialogue among teams across the state.
- Continue collaboration with the District Attorney's Office to increase information presented in the sentencing phase of a trial, including information about the risk and lethality that was present in the relationship and the context around the history of violence between the victim and perpetrator.¹
- Research and identify opportunities to engage individuals and families that have lost loved ones due to domestic violence homicides, including ongoing support, education, and advocacy.

¹ Of the cases reviewed, when a plea was reached before trial, the sentences were longer than those where the cases went to trial.

