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Homicide-suicide in Hong Kong, 1989-98

Chan, C.Y.^a, Beh, S.L.^b and R.G. Broadhurst^{a*}

^a Center for Criminology, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

^b Department of Pathology, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Abstract

This study provides the first systematic research of homicide-suicide (HS) in a Chinese society. Data were drawn from the HK Homicide Monitoring Data-base computer file derived from investigation and death reports held by the HK Police Force and the Coroner's Court. During the 10-year study period, 56 events involving 133 deaths were identified. The majority of offenders were males (75%) and most victims were female (64%). The mean age of offenders and victims were 41.9 and 32.3 years respectively. Spouses and lovers comprised the majority of victims (48.2%) followed by child victims (36%). Most HS events were motivated by separation or termination of marital or sexual relations (39%), economic reasons (25%) and other domestic disputes (20%). The most frequent modes of killing were strangulation/suffocation (26%), stabbing/chopping (24%), followed by gassing/poisoning (14%) and falling from a height (14%). The commonest method of suicide was falling from a height (48%). It was followed by gassing/poisoning (22%) and strangulation/suffocation (13%). Depression (18.3%) was found to be the commonest mental disorder. Most offenders were from low-socio economic background. Two-thirds were unemployed and 76.6% had 9 or less years of education. HS in HK were distinguished from those reported in the western literature in respect to the high relevance of economic factors, the absence of mercy killing between old couples, a higher percentage of pedicide-suicides and the infrequent use of firearms.

Keywords: homicide-suicide; intimate killings; Hong Kong; Chinese

1. Introduction

Homicide followed by suicide (HS) of the offender is one of the more tragic forms of violence and although infrequent it causes family disintegration, psychological trauma amongst survivors and relatives, and public concern [20]. However, HS studies in Chinese societies are rare although Wong & Singer reported HS cases along with other 'abnormal homicide' [33] and Cheung briefly discussed these events in relation to 'maternal filicide' in Hong Kong [8]. This paper provides the first systematic study of HS in a Chinese population and determines the prevalence and characteristics of HS in the Hong Kong, Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China (HK).

2. Data and methods

The definition of HS as a lethal event in which an individual kills another and subsequently commits suicide within one week proposed by Marzuk, et al. (1992) is followed [22]. The data and case histories were drawn from the HK Homicide Monitoring Data-base computer file derived from investigation and death reports held by the HK Police Force and Coroner's Court [6]. All cases that satisfy the above definition over the ten-year period 1989-1998 were included but inchoate offences were excluded (see Table 1). This research also adopted the classifications proposed by Marzuk and

* Corresponding author. Address: Centre for Criminology, University of Hong Kong, Room 1213 KK Leung Building, Pokfulam, Hong Kong; E-mail: broadie@hkucc.hku.hk.

colleagues to categorize offender-victim relationship. The method and mode of killing were derived from mandatory medical autopsy reports required by the HK Coroner's Court. Only offenders who had been diagnosed with a mental disorder prior to the incident were categorized as mentally ill, although some offenders and/or victims might have suffered an undiagnosed mental condition. Previous research has shown those less able to control their anger and impulsiveness pose greater risks of violent conduct [11,17,27,28]. Therefore, offenders described by their relatives and friends as 'impulsive' or 'hot tempered' were also distinguished.

3. Results

Hong Kong is an economically developed Asian city with a population between 5.7 and 6.5 million in the 1990s [18]. About 95% of the HK population is ethnic Chinese [19]. From 1989 to 1998 56 HS incidents were reported resulting in 133 deaths. Of these, 53 events (95%) involved ethnic Chinese but no offender killed outside his/her ethnic group.. There were 74 victims and 60 offenders (of which one offender survived a suicide pact). This is equivalent to one in seven of all homicide deaths (inclusive of offenders) or one in thirteen homicide events and yields a rate of 0.22 (including offenders); 0.13 (victims only) and 0.09 (events) per 100 000 persons per year. This can be compared with the average suicide rate of 11.8 and homicide rate of 1.5 per 100,000 over the same period (HK Police Annual Reports and Coroner's Annual Reports 1989-98).

Offenders and Victims Characteristics: Most HS involved only one victim but 16 events (28.6%) involved 2 or more victims and 3 events involved a homicide followed by a suicide pact. Almost all offenders committed suicide instantly after they killed except in one event where an offender had set a lethal fire to the home of his stepbrother and then committed suicide three days later. On average HS incidents resulted in 2.38 deaths (inclusive of offenders).

All but one event were committed by a single offender. In this case, five co-resident adults committed suicide after they had killed two children of the female participant of this suicide pact. One of the offenders survived and he is recorded here as the principal offender because of the active role he played. Most (N=45 or 75%) HS offenders were male and the male to female ratio was 3: 1 (Table 1). The mean age of offenders was 41.9 years (range 21-72 years). Most offenders were in middle age with 61.7% (N=37) between 30 and 54 years of age. About one in five (N=12) of events were committed by offenders 55 years of age or older. Nearly two-thirds (63.5%) of victims were female (N=47) and just over a third (36.5%) were male (N=27). The mean age of victims was 32.3 (range 4 months–86 years). Almost three in five offenders (N=35 or 58.3%) were currently married, 38.3% (N=23) were single or divorced and in 2 cases their status was unknown. In terms of mental status, two-third of offenders (N=41 or 70%) were apparently free of mental disorder, however, 11 offenders (18.3%) were described as severely depressed (7 female and 4 male), four (6%) were schizophrenic (2 female and 2 males) and in addition, one in five offenders (N=17:16 male and 1 female) were regarded by relatives and friends as unreasonably or extremely 'hot tempered'. One in six offenders (N=11 or 18.3%) had prior criminal records and all were male.

The majority of offenders had low socio-economic status; 61.7% (N=37) were unemployed, retired or performing domestic duties. More than a third (35% or N=21) were low-skilled workers while only 3 (5%) offenders were professionals. The majority of offenders had less than 9 years of education (76.7% or N=46). Only 10 offenders (16.7%) had completed more than 9 years of education and 6.7% (N=4) of offenders had no records of educational attainment. A third of offenders (38.3% or N=23) faced imminent financial pressure prior to the HS, and more than one-quarter of offenders (N=17) appear directly motivated by economic distress.

Offender-Victim Relationship and Motivation: Nearly all HS events (N=54 or 96.4%) occurred between intimates (including non-familial cohabitants) and family members. Homicide of a spouse or lover comprised the largest group (N=19 or 33.9%) followed by killing of children (N=14 or 25%) and killing of other family members (N=8 or 14.3%). In 7 events (12.5%) husbands killed their wives along with their children. In one event already noted five adults formed a suicide pact

and also killed the two children of the married couple in the group and in another the offender chopped his wife and mother in law to death. Only 2 cases (3%) involved non-intimates and non-cohabitants: one was the offender's landlord and another the offender's supervisor (see Table 2). Children (below age 18) were the usual victims of female offenders (N=10 or 71.4%) while, lovers or spouses were usually killed by male offenders (N=24 or 88.9%).

(insert Figure 1).

As for cause or probable motive, 39.3% (N=22) of the incidents appeared to be triggered by separation or termination of marital or sexual relations, 14 events (25%) were preceded by economic distress or financial reasons, and 11 (19.6%) arose from other domestic disputes. Seven events (12.5%) related to depression or had altruistic elements. In 2 events (3.6%) the reason or likely motive for the killing was not known.

Modes of Killing: About a quarter of HS victims (N=19 or 25.7%) were strangled and suffocated to death, a quarter were stabbed or chopped (N=18 or 24.3%), 14.9% gassed/poisoned (N=11; 6 LPG, 3 CO, 1 poison and 1 corrosive fluid), 13.5% fell from a height (N=10), 10.8% beaten with or without weapons (N=8) and 10.8% (N=8) comprised other modes of death. In only one case was a firearm involved and the offender and victim were both police officers who had access to firearms. Females and males showed significant differences in the method of killing. Of the 14 female offenders, 7 killed their child victims by throwing or pushing them from a height, 3 poisoned or gassed their victims, two stabbed/chopped, while one strangled and another drowned her child. In contrast, most males killed their victims by stabbing/chopping, suffocating, or beating. In general females tended to use passive methods whilst male offenders adopted active methods to kill. The difference may be because most victims of female offenders were their own children and often known to be caring and loving to their victims before the incidents. Nearly half (N=25 or 44.6%) used the same method to kill themselves as they did with their victims. Falling from a height was the most frequently used method of suicide (N=29 or 48.3%) followed by gassing/poisoning (N=13 or 21.7%), strangulation/suffocation (N=8 or 13.3%) and stabbing/chopping (N=3 or 5%).

(insert Figure 2).

Discussion

The proportion of HS in all homicide events varied considerably in studies undertaken in other jurisdictions and comparisons with HK are fraught because of differences in temporality, sources, definitions, and demographic and other variables employed. Estimates of the proportion of HS have ranged from as low as 1.5% of all recorded homicide in the USA [3] to 42% in Denmark [31]. In HK the proportion of HS of all homicides was 7% and approximate to the rate reported by Carcach & Grabosky for Australia [7] and Barraclough & Harris [2] and Milroy [24, 25] for England and Wales. The HK HS rate of 0.22 per 100 000 persons falls within the range of the international samples reported by Coid [7] and Milroy [23] and conforms to their observation that per capita rates of HS appear constant across countries and through time [9,22, 23].

(insert Table 3).

Similarities: HK HS shared many similarities with international findings in terms of gender proportion, motivation and offender-victim relationship. Existing findings report that male offenders predominantly committed HS and females were the usual victims [7,9,13,15,16,21,22,26,29]. HS also occurred disproportionately among long term and intimate relations often motivated by jealousy and termination of a relationship [13,21,22,27,31]. Most HS offenders were married [3,7,22,26] and compared with non-HS homicides, were older, had fewer prior criminal histories and higher economic status [26,30,31,32]. The most common mental disorders were depression and schizophrenia. [13,21,22,27,31].

Our findings are congruent with the literature although the HK data seems to be closer to the

European than the US experience of HS. The percentage of male offenders in HK was 75% but a higher proportion of male offenders at 85% were reported for Paris [21], 90% for Canada [4] and, 85% to 94% for the UK [2, 24] although West [31] reported a lower percentage for the UK in the 1950s at 60%. Wolfgang (92%) [32] and, Berman (100%) [3] report even higher proportions of male offenders in their US studies. In Hong Kong females comprised 64% of all victims and this was similar to the proportion found in Paris (60%) [21] but, lower than the 70% reported by West [31], or 75% reported by Barraclough & Harris [2] for the UK and 74% for Australia [5]. The proportion of female victims in the US was even higher reaching 88% in Berman's [3] and 85% in Marzuk et al.'s [22] studies.

Consortial HS was the most frequently reported HS in almost all studies and over 65% of HS in US studies were of this type [3,29,32]. Comparatively, Paris and Hong Kong reported a lower proportion at 45% [21] and 48% respectively for consortial killings. Jealousy as the principal motivation occurred less often in Paris with 18% [21] while, in HK this motive was found in about two-fifths of events (39.3%) and Milroy reported 46% of UK cases involved jealousy [25]. US studies reported a higher proportion (50% to 75%) of HS that were triggered by morbid jealousy [22]. Over a-third (N=20 or 35.7%) of HS events in HK involved the death of children (below the age of 18 years). This was similar to the proportion reported by Buteau, et al. (35%, below the age of 14 years) for Quebec [4]. Lecomte & Fornes [21] and West [31] both reported a higher proportion of child victims at 45% for Paris and 47% for the UK. However, recent UK findings reported by Milroy [24] and Barraclough & Harris [2] found lower proportions of child victims at 24.6% and 28% respectively. US researchers report comparatively fewer child victims with 7.5% observed by Stack [29] and 10.7% by Palermo et al. [26].

Differences: The relevance or involvement of economic factors, the frequency of elderly HS and the mode of killing distinguish HS in HK from elsewhere. Economic distress played a very small part in the overseas studies [21,26,31,32] and only one study reported the lower socio-economic background of HS offenders [2]. In Paris only 5.4% of HS [21] and 11% of HS in Yorkshire and Humberside [25] were triggered by economic reasons. Many studies did not distinguish economic stress as a motive because of its apparent rarity and some concluded that generally HS offenders were from higher socio-economic status [3,26,32]. Byard, et al. also reported that no child was killed because of economic pressures amongst 13 homicide-suicide events between 1969 to 1998 involving children in South Australia [5]. However, a quarter of the HS in HK arose from economic disputes or problems and more than one-third of offenders faced imminent economic crisis. Economic stress was especially prominent in HS cases involving child victims with 7 (43.7%) of all pedicide-suicides and 6 (85.7%) familicides related to economic stress. The following case illustrates the desperation of a father who faced financial difficulties.

A middle age man married for 17 years bludgeoned to death his wife and 16 years old son while they were asleep and then leaped to his death. Relatives described him as eager for quick success but sensitive about status and face. However, he was a loving husband and devoted father. His two business ventures ultimately failed and he was working as a delivery driver at the time of the incident. The family was reduced to a few dollars in the bank and owed substantial debts to friends and relatives. (Case 17)

Mercy killings between older couples were frequently reported in other research [4,12,22] but no 'mercy killing' involving elderly couples in the HK sample was found. On the contrary, all events (N=12 or 21.43%) involving older people (55 years and older) arose from disputes, often with adult children. For example, three elderly parents killed their adult children to stop them from moving away and in defense of parental 'respect' and interest. Three cases involved domestic disputes between elderly co-tenants: a common circumstance in over-crowded accommodation in Hong Kong. The following case illustrates how a father killed his son and wife to preserve his parental authority.

A 69 years old retired man who lived with his son aged 30 and his wife aged 60 became

angry when the son suggested moving out of the family flat with his mother. The son could no longer put up with his fathers' constant 'hot tempered' scolding of his mother and tyrannical conduct. On the day of the incident his wife reported to relatives that she was worried as he was acting strangely. That night he set fire to the flat after locking the door preventing the escape of his son and wife: all three perished. No argument was heard before the incident and it is believed that he had planned the killing. (Case 33)

Limited research has been conducted on pedicide-suicides. West reported that in the UK most children were killed by their mothers [31]. However, more recent findings show that pedicide-suicides were more likely committed by male offenders often triggered by separation rage and custody disputes [21,27] although an Australian study reported that almost half of the pedicide-suicide events were committed by the mother of the victims [5]. Marzuk et al. (1992) also reported that between 40% and 60% of children were killed by their fathers and between 16% and 29% of children were killed by their mothers [22]. In HK 69.2% of pedicide-suicides were committed by the mother of the victim, however, this proportion fell to 47% when all familicide-suicides are considered. Further research to explore the role of gender in HS involving children is suggested.

Firearms were the most frequently used weapons in most studies [12, 13, 21, 22] but in HK the most frequent means of killing were strangulation or stabbing and only one event was firearms related.

Conclusion

This paper provides a preliminary description of the nature of HS in HK and briefly reviews previous studies in other countries to distinguish possible differences in the character of these tragic events between Chinese and other societies. These differences suggest cultural variations and socio-economic factors are implicated. Situational factors are also relevant given the extremely low usage of firearms, which is related to very strict gun control in HK. The *Firearms and Ammunition Ordinance* (Cap 238) Laws of Hong Kong [14] applies a very broad definition of firearms and includes virtually any projectile. Possession of a firearm is almost exclusive to police and armed sections of other disciplinary services such as Customs & Excise and Correctional Services. Licences for shotguns are only issued to registered and reputable security companies and recreational (sporting) use of firearms is strictly controlled in terms of weapon type, storage (provided at the sporting club) and possession and is limited to a single gun club. The Commissioner of Police of HK is the only person authorized to issue licenses for possession of firearms and also controls the license to trade or sell. Even possession of an imitation weapon is liable to imprisonment for 2 years and 7 years if that person has been convicted of a serious offence in the past 10 years. Trespassing with a firearm without reasonable excuse is liable on conviction to imprisonment for up to 14 years [14].

The significant relevance of economic factors could possibly be explained by the materialistic mentality of Hong Kong people aggravated by a culture which discourages seeking help outside the family circle. The absence of mercy killings between old couples may be due to traditional Chinese values, which emphasize parental dignity and encourage cohabitation with elderly parents. Nevertheless, further studies are necessary to explain the differences identified.

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Table 2: Victim-offender Relationship (Type) and Principle Motive or Precipitant (Class) by Type of HS

Type of Relation	No. Incident
I Spousal or Consortial	27
Perpetrator	
1. Spouse	19 ⁽¹⁾
2. Consort	8
Type of Homicide	
i. Uxoricide (spouse killing)	19 ⁽¹⁾
ii. Consortial (murder of lover)	8
Familial	29
Perpetrator	
1. Mother	9
2. Father	11 ⁽¹⁾
3. Child (under 18 yr) ⁽²⁾	-
4. Other adult family member (over 18 yr)	9
Type of Homicide	
i. Neonaticide (child < 24 hr)	-
ii. Infanticide (child > 1 day, < 1 yr)	1
iii. Pesticide (child 1 through 18 yr)	18 ⁽³⁾
iv. Adult family member (>18 yr)	10
III. Extrafamilial	7⁽⁴⁾
	Class
A. Amorous jealousy	22
B. Mercy killing (because of declining health of victim or offender)	-
C. Altruistic or extended suicides (includes salvation fantasies of rescue and escape from problems)	7
D. Family financial or social stressors	14
E. Retaliation	11
F. Other	-
G. Unspecified	2

Notes

⁽¹⁾ Includes seven familicide events in which the offender killed both his wife and children and a case in which five adults committed suicide and killed two children.

⁽²⁾ Most studies define children as under the age of 16, however, 18 years of age is the age of majority in HK and this is applied here. Only one child victim aged 18 was observed and she along with her younger sister and mother were killed by her father

⁽³⁾ All were killed by parents except in one event a teenager was killed by the cohabiting consort of her mother.

⁽⁴⁾ Includes one infanticide event and classifications are derived from Marzuk et al. (1992.)

Table 2: Type of HS based on Victim-offender Relationship (Type) and Principle Motive (authors/reviewers reference only)

Type of Relation	No. Incident
I Spousal or Consortial only	20
Victim	
1. Spouse (9 wives, 3 husbands)	12
2. Consort (8 girl friends)	8
Type of Homicide	
i. Uxoridal (spouse killing)	12
ii. Consortial (murder of lover)	8
II. Familial	29
Victim	
1. Wife and children	7*
2. Parent (all committed by male offender)	4
3. Child (committed by 9 mothers and 4 fathers)	13**
4. Other family member (committed by 4 male and 1 female)	5***
Type of Homicide	
ii. Neonaticide (child < 24 hr)	-
iii. Infanticide only (child > 1 day, < 1 yr)	1
iv. Pesticide only (child 1 through 18 yr)	11
v. Familicide	7
vi. Adult family member (including parents) (>18 yr)	10
III. Extrafamilial	7 ****
Class	
A. Amorous jealousy	22
B. Depression	7
C. Family financial stresses	14
D. Other disputes	11
E. Unspecified	2

Notes

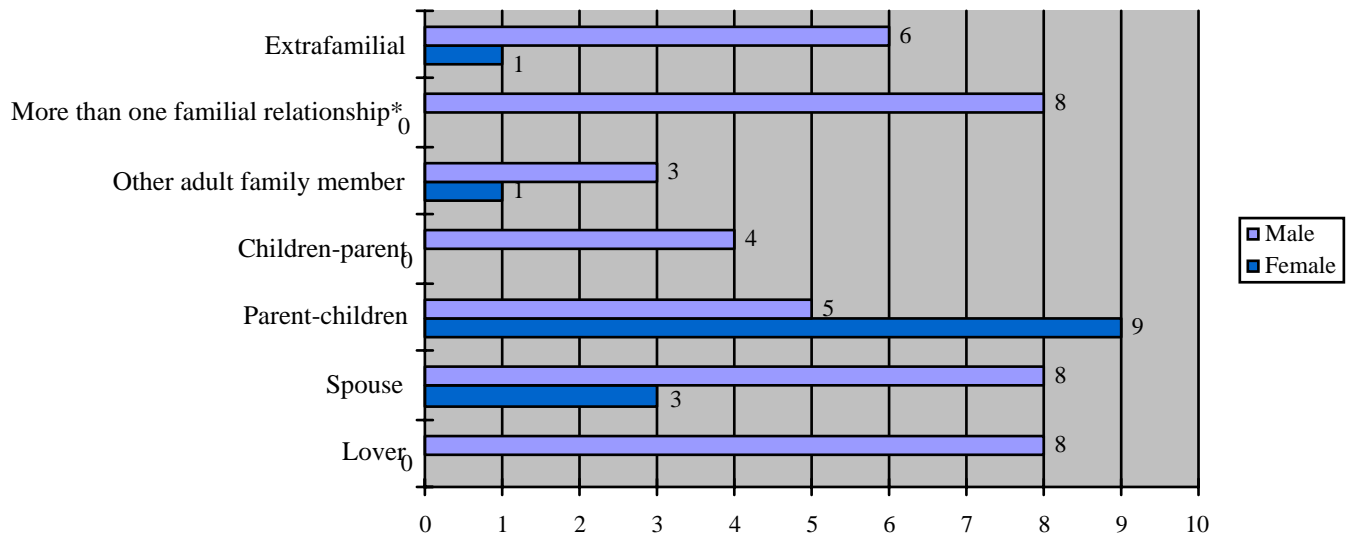
*In one event the offender killed his elderly wife and adult son. In all other events, child victims were below 18 years of age.

** All child victims were below age 18 except one event that the victim was an adult.

*** All were adult victims except for an offender who killed the teenage daughter of his cohabiting consort.

****Includes a 'infanticide' perpetrated by a domestic helper.

Figure 1 - Offender-victim relationship by sex of principle offender



*Includes seven events where an offender killed his wife and children and another killed his wife and mother-in-law.

Figure 2 - Mode of Killing by sex of principle offender

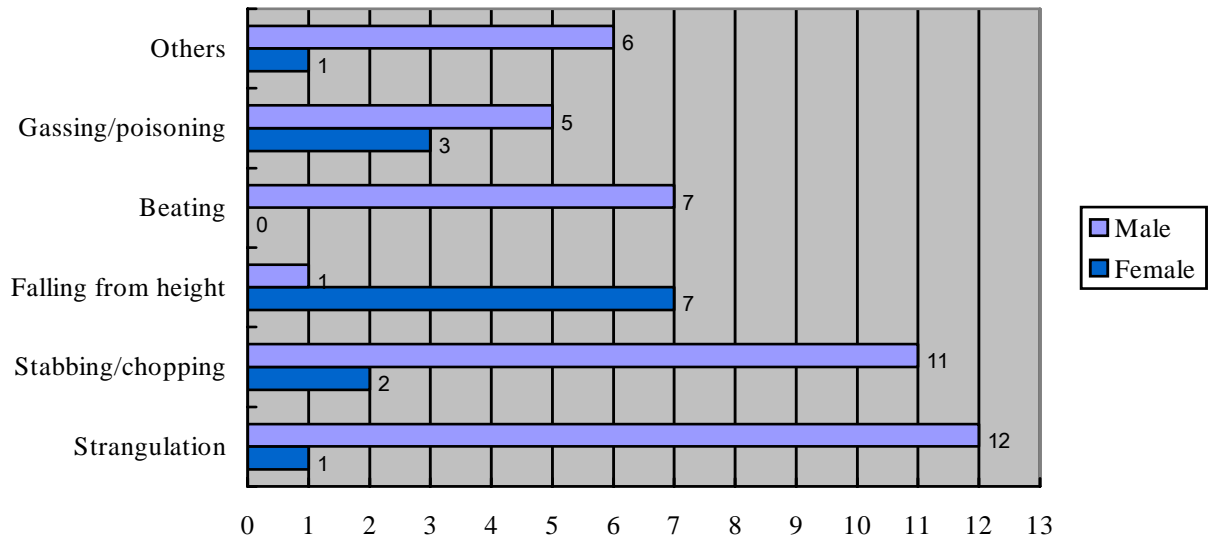


Table 3 - Select Summary of Homicide followed by Suicide Studies

Author & year	No of HS Cases*	Place	Scope in years	Data sources	% HS / homicide	% Male offenders	% Female victims	Offender mean age	Victim mean age	% Fire-arms	% Jealousy & desertion motive	% Spouse & lover victims	% Child victims
This study 2003	56	Hong Kong	1989-1998	HK Police & Coroner's Court	7 events	75	63.5	41.9	32.3	1.7	39.3	48.2 (events)	35.7 (events)
Barraclough & Harris 2002 [2]	144	England & Wales	1988-1992	Death certificates	6 victims	85	75	35-44 (mode)	NA	28.9	NA	67.4 (events)	28 (events)
Lecomte & Fornes 1998 [21]	56	Paris & suburbs	1991-1996	Institute of Forensic Medicine	NA	85	60	51.0 male & 40.5 female	NA	80	18	45	45
Carcach & Grabosky 1998 [7]	144	Australia	1989-1996	National Homicide Monitoring Programme	6.5 events	91.4	73.6	39.6	33.2	60	approx. 45	43	NA
Aderibigbe 1997 [1]	300	USA	1990-1995	newspapers	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	90	NA	36-57	0-3
Stack 1997 [29]	265	Chicago	1965-1990	Chicago Police	1.6 events**	97 **	78.5 **	39.7**	35**	NA	NA	65**	7.5**
Milroy 1993, 1995 [24, 25]	52	Yorkshire & Humberside, UK	1975-1992	Coroner's files	5-10 of England & Wales	94	60 (excluding children)	48.4	NA	33	46	74	24.6
Buteau, et al 1993 [4]	39	Quebec	1988-1990	Coroner's files	13.7 victims	90	NA	NA	NA	56	NA	32 (spouses)	35
Marzuk et. al. 1992 [22]	NA	USA	NA	Published HS studies in USA	approx. 5 (1980s)	93-97	85	39.6	NA	80-94	50-75	approx. 65	NA
Berman 1979 [3]	20	Philadelphia Baltimore Washington D.C.	1974-1975	Police & medical reports of suicide cases	1.5 events	100	87.5	38.4	34.5 median	95	85	67	0
West 1965 [31]	148	UK (London area)	1954-1961	Scotland Yard & Metropolitan Police District	33 offenders	59.5	70	NA	NA	19.8	NA	43.2	47
Wolfgang 1958 [32]	24	Philadelphia	1948-1952	Philadelphia Police	4 offenders	92	NA	38.3 median	30.1 median	62.5	27 (of victims)	69	NA

Notes * All cases available to the authors were included; ** Stack included only intimates and excluded casual acquaintances; ***Marzuk et al. 1992 surveyed all published USA HS studies available since 1966; NA = no relevant data is available or criteria uncertain.

