

# **They Called it a Murder/Suicide**

By: Sandra McBeth, LCSW

They called it a 'murder/suicide'. It was on the news, social media, and in the minds of all who lived in this small suburban town in New Jersey that I call home. A father killed his 16-year-old son, his wife, and then himself. This horrific event was, in fact, an act of domestic violence.

I wrote this blog with the intention of focusing on the correlation with Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and suicidality of the victim population of IPV, prior to hearing the tragic news of a family lost. This event, however, reminded me that both suicide and domestic violence can lie within, and directly impact, the family system at large. So, I changed course a bit and this is what I learned - IPV and suicide are correlated for all members of the family. In fact, combined with homicide-suicide data, IPV is estimated to be associated with 6.1% or more of suicides overall.

I also learned that when a perpetrator of domestic violence kills their partner and then themselves, it is called Intimate Partner Homicide-Suicide (IPHS). IPHS accounts for an estimated 2% of suicides. When a parent murders their child it is called Filicide. One study of 1,386 child homicide victims found that 20% of these children were victims of Filicide within the context of IPV.

The World Health Organization (WHO) found that one of the most "consistent risk factors for suicide attempts for females -after adjusting for probable common mental health disorders" - was intimate partner violence. At least one study has shown that 36% of female survivors have considered suicide and 23% of domestic violence survivors have attempted suicide. While there have been some studies that look at both perpetrators of IPVH, and victims of IPV, in relation to suicidality, it is widely recognized that examining if IPV precipitates suicide is under researched. Same sex couples research is also limited, but some studies suggest that men in same sex relationships can experience significant psychological symptoms as a consequence of IPV; associations among IPV and PTSD, depression, and suicide have been documented.

With regard to suicidality in children exposed to IPV, as recent as 2016, an article in the American Psychological Association journal noted that the topic of children dying by suicide is also under researched. However, at least one study connected early exposure to IPV confers a risk of suicide attempts and particularly suicide death in youths and young adults.

It turns out that it is difficult to measure death by suicide. Whether it has to do with how the death is coded in the National Violent Death Reporting System, or if it is a topic that has not been deemed as a priority for research, we do not have a full picture of the enormity of the correlation of IPV and suicide. However, what I did learn is that we need to be regularly conducting screenings of all family members experiencing IPV.

Not only should all of us whose job is to work directly with IPV be screening all of the family members, anyone who reads this blog can help just by taking in this information and allowing your mind to create a space to recognize that this can be happening to your neighbor, your co-

worker, your family member or perhaps even yourself. We can all ask the questions “are you okay?” and “are you safe?”, we may not get a direct answer in response, but we just may have planted a seed that could create movement at some point. The one thing that I noticed, that people that knew the family that died by IPVH in my community, was that they couldn’t believe it, because they didn’t know the family was struggling. One thing I know for sure is that suicide and IPV are both steeped in shame and secrecy. We can help by reaching out. We can help just by asking the questions.

## References

Clay, R. A. (2014, January 1). Suicide and intimate partner violence. *Monitor on Psychology*, 45(10). <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2014/11/suicide-violence>

Castellví, P., Miranda-Mendizábal, A., Parés-Badell, O., Almenara, J., Alonso, I., Blasco, M. J., ... & Alonso, J. (2017). Exposure to violence, a risk for suicide in youths and young adults. A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies. *Acta psychiatrica scandinavica*, 135(3), 195-211.

Cavanaugh, C. E., Messing, J. T., Del-Colle, M., O'Sullivan, C., & Campbell, J. C. (2011). Prevalence and correlates of suicidal behavior among adult female victims of intimate partner violence. *Suicide & life-threatening behavior*, 41(4), 372–383. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1943-278X.2011.00035.x>

Devries et.al., Violence against women is strongly associated with suicide attempts: evidence from the WHO multi-country study on women's health and domestic violence against women, 73 *Soc. Sci. Med* 79-86 (Jul. 2011).

Fitzpatrick, S. J., Brew, B. K., Handley, T., & Perkins, D. (2022). Men, suicide, and family and interpersonal violence: A mixed methods exploratory study. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 44(6), 991-1008.

Kafka, J. M., Moracco, K. B. E., Taheri, C., Young, B. R., Graham, L. M., Macy, R. J., & Proescholdbell, S. (2022). Intimate partner violence victimization and perpetration as precursors to suicide. *SSM - population health*, 18, 101079. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2022.101079>

Nadine Kaslow, Marylouise Kelley and Carole Warshaw, Suicide Prevention Resource Center, Research Highlights Series: Intimate Partner Violence And Suicide Webinar (Sept. 27, 2013).