

Partner-Killing by Women in Cohabiting Relationships and Marital Relationships

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Using a national-level U.S. database that includes more than 400,000 homicides committed from 1976 to 1994, the author calculated rates of partner-killing by women by relationship type (cohabiting or marital), by partner ages, and by the age difference between partners. Men in cohabiting relationships are 10 times more likely to be killed by their partners than are married men. Within marriages, the risk of being killed by a partner decreases with a man's age. Within cohabiting relationships, in contrast, middle-aged men are at greatest risk of being killed by their partners. The risk that a man will be killed by his partner generally increases with greater age difference between partners. These findings provide the first national-level replications of risk patterns reported for a national-level Canadian sample. Discussion highlights future research directions, including identifying why men in cohabiting relationships incur greater risk of being killed by their partners than do married men.

Intimate relationships sometimes include partner-directed violence. Sometimes this violence is bidirectional, with each partner inflicting abuse and injury on the other (e.g., Archer, 2000). Other times, this violence is directed only by one partner against the other, such as when a man inflicts years of unreciprocated intimidation, abuse, and injury on his partner (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Daly, Wilson, & Weghorst, 1982; Wilson & Daly, 1996).

At the extreme, violence in intimate relationships can end in partner-killing (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Daly et al., 1982; Shackelford, Buss, & Peters, 2000; Wilson & Daly, 1996). Partner-killing can occur following a period of bidirectional violence

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I thank Gregg LeBlanc, Rick Michalski, Viviana Weekes-Shackelford, and two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments that improved this article and David Buss, Martin Daly, and Margo Wilson for helpful discussions of partner-killing.

HOMICIDE STUDIES, Vol. 5 No. 3, August 2001 253-266
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(Archer, 2000). Partner-killing also can occur following unidirectional violence against a partner, as in the case of a battered woman who kills her partner in self-defense (Barnard, Vera, Vera, & Newman, 1982; Browne, 1987; Chimbos, 1978; Daniel & Harris, 1982; Goetting, 1987; Jones, 1980; Jurik & Winn, 1990; Totman, 1978; Wilbanks, 1983).

Recent research has identified several good predictors of partner-killing. One such predictor is the marital status of two people who are in an intimate relationship and who live together. Nonmarital, coresident relationships go by different labels, including common-law marriages, de facto marital relationships, and cohabiting relationships. In this article, I refer to these relationships with the least restrictive label, cohabiting relationships. Men and women in cohabiting relationships are at much greater risk for being killed by their partners than are married men and women (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Shackelford, in press; Wilson, Daly, & Wright, 1993; Wilson, Johnson, & Daly, 1995). In this article, I focus on partner-killing by women, because far less work has addressed this side of partner-killing, relative to the amount of work on partner-killing by men (see Daly & Wilson, 1988; Shackelford et al., 2000; Wilson et al., 1993; Wilson et al., 1995).

Using national-level homicide data and population estimates from Canada, Wilson et al. (1993) documented that men in cohabiting relationships are about 15 times more likely to be killed by their partners than are married men. Research using city-level data from the United States corroborates the excess risk of partner-killing for cohabiting men relative to married men. Men in cohabiting relationships constituted 42% of 43 female-perpetrated partner-killings in Detroit in 1972 (Wilson & Daly, 1992), 40% of 25 female-perpetrated partner-killings in Houston in 1969 (Lundsgaarde, 1977), and 51% of 862 female-perpetrated partner-killings in Chicago during 1965 to 1989 (Wilson & Daly, 1992). Compare these percentages with recent population estimates suggesting that less than 10% of men that live with a partner are cohabiting but not married (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989).

Results of analyses of the city-level U.S. data corroborate the results of analyses of the national-level Canadian data, suggesting that men in both countries incur excess risk of being killed by their partners when they are in a cohabiting relationship, compared with when they are in a marital relationship. National-level

analyses based on data from the United States have not been published on this excess homicide risk. Such analyses would allow for a clearer replication of the national-level Canadian data. Besides analyses of the Canadian data, no other national-level analyses have been published on the excess risk of partner-killing incurred by cohabiting men relative to married men. In this article, I report analyses using national-level data from the United States for the risk of being killed by a partner for men in cohabiting versus marital relationships.

In addition to documenting with national-level Canadian data that men incur greater partner-killing risk in cohabiting relative to marital relationships, Wilson and Daly (1994) and Daly and Wilson (1988) reported that within marital relationships, men in their teens and early 20s are at greatest risk of being killed by a partner. Within cohabiting relationships, in contrast, middle-aged men, in their 40s and 50s, are at greatest risk of being killed by a partner (Daly & Wilson, 1988). I use national-level U.S. data to attempt to replicate these relationship-differentiated age-risk patterns.

Finally, Daly and Wilson (1988) reported that in both marital relationships and cohabiting relationships, the age difference between the man and the woman predicts a man's risk of being killed by his partner. Men in both types of relationships are at greater risk of being killed when partnered to women who are either much older or much younger than they are. I use national-level U.S. data to attempt to replicate these risk patterns (see Shackelford, in press).

METHOD

National Homicide Database

The United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) requests information from each state on criminal homicides. Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHRs) include incident-level data on every reported homicide, including the relationship of the victim to the offender and the ages of the victim and offender. The database analyzed for the present project includes SHRs for the years 1976 to 1994 (Fox, 1996), providing information on 429,729 homicides. I calculated homicide rates for married men and for

cohabiting men according to population estimates provided by the United States Bureau of the Census (1980, 1990). For married men, I calculated rates using weighted averages of the 1980 and 1990 census data; for cohabiting men, I calculated rates using weighted averages of the 1980 and 1990 Current Population Survey for unmarried coresident couples. All estimates and calculations are available from the author upon request.

Procedures

Of the more than 400,000 cases of homicide included in the database, 8,077 were cases in which a woman killed the man to whom she was legally married, and 2,054 were cases in which a woman killed the man with whom she was cohabiting but to whom she was not married. Homicides involving ex-spouses were excluded. The average age of married victims was 41.4 years ($SD = 12.8$ years), ranging from 17 to 98 years. The average age of married perpetrators was 37.5 years ($SD = 12.0$ years), ranging from 12 to 98 years. The average age of cohabiting victims was 38.5 years ($SD = 12.0$ years), ranging from 14 to 89 years. The average age of cohabiting perpetrators was 34.5 years ($SD = 11.3$ years), ranging from 15 to 86 years.

RESULTS

In this section, I first report the risk of being killed by a partner for married men and for cohabiting men in the United States. I then report the risk of being killed by a partner for married men and for cohabiting men as a function of the man's age and the woman's age. Finally, I report the risk of being killed by a partner for men in the two types of relationships as a function of the age difference between the partners. For each analysis of the national-level U.S. data, I note whether the analysis replicates findings reported using national-level Canadian data. The age groupings for the table and figures correspond to the age groupings provided by the Current Population Survey for national estimates of cohabitation. These age groupings are more crude than those provided for married couples but are used to maximize the comparability of the results across relationship type.

In the United States, married men were killed by their partners at a rate of 7.9 men per million married men per annum, whereas cohabiting men were killed at a much higher rate of 82.0 men per million cohabiting men per annum. Thus, cohabiting men in the United States incurred more than 10 times the risk of being killed by their partners than did married men. This corroborates the results of analyses of Canadian data (Wilson et al., 1993).

Figure 1 shows rates of partner-killing for married men (clear bars) and for cohabiting men (dark bars) as a function of the man's age. Among married men, the risk of being killed by a partner is greatest for the youngest men. Married men who are less than 25 years old incur about 1.5 times the risk of homicide as men in the 25 to 34 age group and about 2 times the risk of men in the 35 to 44 age group. Among cohabiting men, middle-aged men, in the 45 to 64 age group, incur the greatest risk of being killed by a partner. Men in this age group incur more than 4 times the risk of men in the youngest and oldest age groups. These differential risk patterns for married men and cohabiting men replicate the results of national-level analyses reported by Daly and Wilson (1988) for Canada.

Figure 2 shows partner-killing perpetration rates for married women (clear bars) and for cohabiting women (dark bars). The risk of killing a partner is highest for married women in the youngest age group (less than 25 years) and appears to decrease with the woman's age, corroborating a pattern identified by analyses of Canadian data (Wilson & Daly, 1994). The risk of partner-killing by women increases with the woman's age for cohabiting women, up to the 35 to 44 age group. Homicide perpetration risk then decreases with age for cohabiting women 45 years and older.

Table 1 shows the rates of partner-killing by women per million married couples per annum (top figure in each cell) and per million cohabiting couples per annum (bottom figure in each cell) as a function of the ages of the partners. Figure 3 is constructed from the data presented in Table 1 and shows the risk of partner-killing by women as a function of the age difference between partners, in categories. In this figure, 1 indicates a one-category age difference, 2 indicates a two-category age difference, and so on. Positive values refer to categorical differences in which the man is older than the woman, whereas negative values refer to categorical differences in which the woman is older than the man. A 0 refers to cases

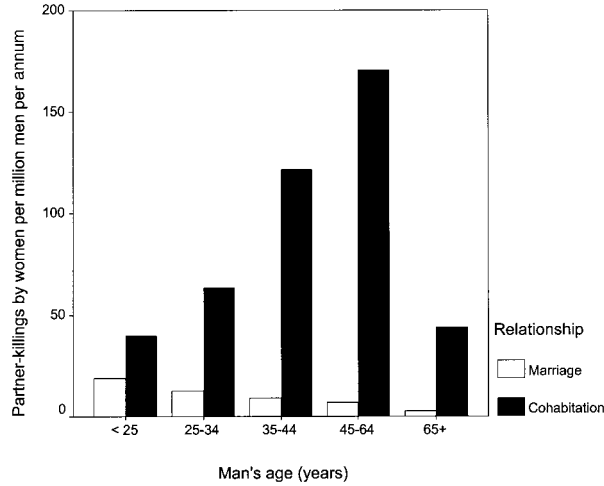


Figure 1: Partner-Killings by Women per Million Men per Annum as a Function of Relationship Type and Man's Age

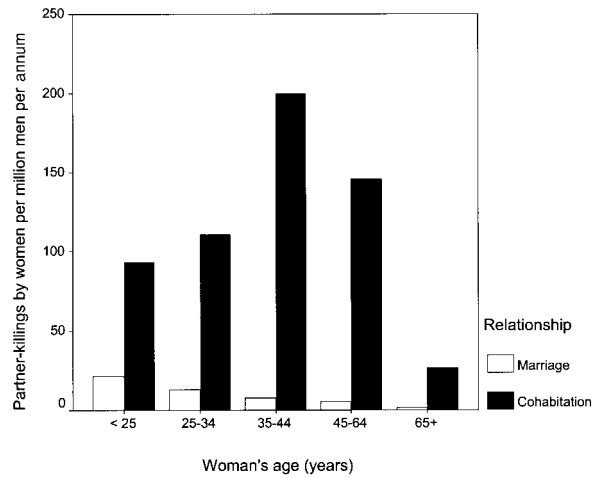


Figure 2: Partner-Killings by Women per Million Women per Annum as a Function of Relationship Type and Woman's Age

in which the man and woman are in the same age category. The age categories used to generate the categorical differences for Figure 3 are, in years, less than 25, 25 to 34, 35 to 44, 45 to 64, and 65 and older. These age categories and the associated categorical age

TABLE 1
Partner-Killings by Women per Million per Annum, by Man's Age and Woman's Age

<i>Man's Age</i>	<i>Woman's Age</i>				
	<i>< 25</i>	<i>25 to 34</i>	<i>35 to 44</i>	<i>45 to 64</i>	<i>Over 65</i>
<i>< 25</i>					
Married	20.0	24.0	35.9	4.8	0.0
Cohabiting	20.5	30.3	114.0	8.8	0.0
<i>25 to 34</i>					
Married	21.2	11.2	13.2	30.0	10.5
Cohabiting	34.4	33.0	89.3	129.2	0.0
<i>35 to 44</i>					
Married	67.6	14.1	6.5	11.7	10.5
Cohabiting	61.0	74.4	72.0	101.4	21.1
<i>45 to 64</i>					
Married	60.6	41.2	9.7	5.0	6.3
Cohabiting	97.7	120.6	108.0	77.9	27.2
<i>Older than 65</i>					
Married	52.6	40.1	33.0	3.9	1.4
Cohabiting	52.6	72.4	79.0	25.8	11.4

differences are used because this is the structure in which the relevant data are provided for cohabiting couples by the Current Population Survey (all data are available from the author upon request). These age groupings are more crude than those provided for married couples but are used to maximize the comparability of the results across relationship type.

Figure 3 shows that for both marital relationships and cohabiting relationships, partner-killing rates for men partnered to older women and for men partnered to younger women are higher than partner-killing rates for men partnered to same-age women. For both married men and cohabiting men, the homicide rate for men partnered to women who are either younger or older by two age categories is more than 2 times higher than the homicide rate for men partnered to same-age women. The positive relationship between age difference between partners and the rate of partner-killing by women, across marital relationships and cohabiting relationships, replicates homicide patterns reported by Daly and Wilson (1988) for Canadian data and emerges despite the crudeness of the measurement of age-differences grouping. Note that the sample sizes for homicides at the tails of both distributions are relatively small, such that the corresponding homicide rates are concomitantly less stable. These rates therefore should be inter-

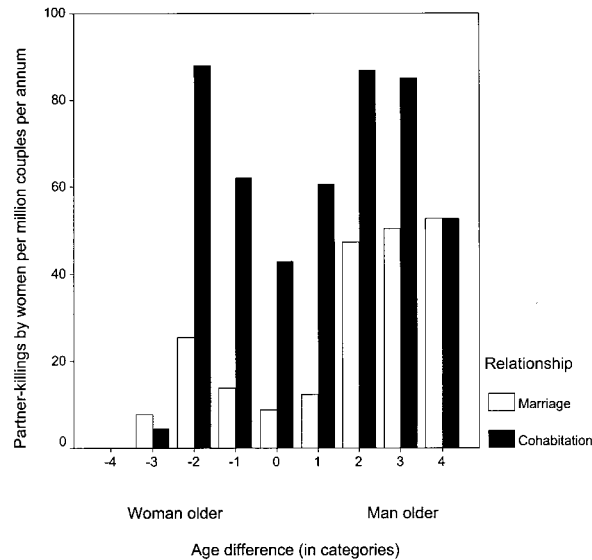


Figure 3: Partner-Killings by Women per Million Couples per Annum as a Function of Relationship Type and Age Difference Between Partners, in Categories

NOTE: A 1 indicates a one category difference, a 2 indicates a two category difference, and so on. Positive values refer to categorical differences in which the man is older than the woman. Negative values refer to categorical differences in which the woman is older than the man. A 0 refers to cases in which the man and woman are in the same age category. Age categories used to produce categorical differences are as follows, in years: < 25, 25 to 34, 35 to 44, 45 to 64, and older than 65.

preted with greater caution than rates presented within the tails of the distributions (data are available from the author upon request).

DISCUSSION

Using a national-level homicide database and relevant population estimates for the United States, I calculated rates of partner-killing by women by type of relationship, cohabiting or marital; by the ages of the partners; and by the age difference between partners. Men in cohabiting relationships incur about 10 times the risk of homicide as men in marital relationships. This replicates findings reported by Wilson et al. (1993) for national-level Canadian data. Within marital relationships, the risk of homicide

decreases with a man's age. Within cohabiting relationships, in contrast, middle-aged men are at greatest risk of homicide. Both risk patterns replicate the results of analyses using national-level Canadian data (Daly & Wilson, 1988). Paralleling the homicide victimization rates, homicide perpetration rates are highest for younger married women and for older cohabiting women. This pattern for homicide perpetration among married women replicates the results of analyses conducted on national-level Canadian data (Wilson & Daly, 1994). Finally, the risk of being killed by a partner for men increases with greater age difference between partners, replicating analyses of Canadian data (Daly & Wilson, 1988).

Using national-level U.S. data, the current research replicates several key findings reported by Daly and Wilson (1988), Wilson and Daly (1994), and Wilson et al. (1993) for national-level Canadian data. The current work is important because no other research, besides that conducted by Wilson, Daly, and colleagues, has presented the results of national-level analyses of the risk of partner-killing by women as a function of type of relationship. That the current analyses replicate the findings of Wilson, Daly, and colleagues makes the results from both countries more powerful. Neither set of findings can be attributed to some quirk or strangeness of Canada or the United States. It is possible, however, that these results would not replicate in national-level analyses of non-Western countries, such as Japan, China, or Korea. It also is possible that these results may not replicate in non-North American but Western countries, such as France, Germany, and Spain. Only future research can answer these empirical questions.

Previous work has identified recording errors, coding errors, and other shortcomings of the FBI's SHR database (see Fox, 1996; Langford, Isaac, & Kabat, 1998; Riedel, 1999). A reviewer of this article offered that one area of coding problems, for example, surrounds estrangement of a couple. Estrangement increases the risk of partner-killing for both women and men (Wilson & Daly, 1993a), and whether a couple is estranged may affect how their relationship is recorded in official records and, subsequently, in the SHR database. A married couple who is estranged is likely to be coded as "married" until they are divorced, whereas an estranged cohabiting couple may be coded as "acquaintances." As this reviewer pointed out, however, it is not clear that these coding

problems might systematically affect the results of the current research. The reader is cautioned that these and other coding problems exist, however. Other coding problems might be noted (see Fox, 1996; Langford et al., 1998; Riedel, 1999), none of which clearly affects the results of the current research, and so are not detailed here. That the current analyses replicate the risk patterns identified in national-level Canadian data suggests that these risk patterns are robust, filtering through any recording or coding errors that exist in the FBI SHR database.

Several questions are left unanswered by analyses of the Canadian and U.S. data. For example, why is the risk of partner-killing by women greater in cohabiting relationships than it is in marital relationships? One possibility is that men in cohabiting relationships, compared with men in marital relationships, are more likely to batter their partners, and their partners, in turn, are more likely to kill them in self-defense or as a last-ditch effort to survive (Barnard et al., 1982; Browne, 1987; Chimbos, 1978; Daniel & Harris, 1982; Goetting, 1987; Jones, 1980; Jurik & Winn, 1990; Totman, 1978; Wilbanks, 1983).

Relative to marital relationships, cohabiting relationships are more likely to break up (Booth & Johnson, 1988; Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Wu & Balakrishnan, 1992), and men in cohabiting relationships may be especially sensitive to this "predicament" (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Shackelford, in press; Wilson & Daly, 1993b). They may have a lower threshold for reacting to suspected infidelity or relationship termination, resulting in more frequent partner battery (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Shackelford, in press; Wilson & Daly, 1993b). Women who are battered by their partners often reach a "breakpoint" when they can no longer withstand the abuse (Browne, 1987). Often this occurs when their partners become abusive toward the women's children, and it is at this breakpoint that women kill their partners (Barnard et al., 1982; Browne, 1987; Chimbos, 1978; Daniel & Harris, 1982; Goetting, 1987; Jones, 1980; Jurik & Winn, 1990; Totman, 1978; Wilbanks, 1983). A result of these relationship dynamics may be the greater risk of partner-killing by women in cohabiting relationships.

Cohabiting relationships may be more dangerous for men because these relationships co-occur with other risk factors for homicide. Homicide is more common among the poor and the

young (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Wilson & Daly, 1985) and so, too, are cohabiting relationships, relative to marital relationships. Stepchildren also are more common among cohabiting couples, and just as the presence of stepchildren increases the risk of partner-killing by men (Brewer & Paulsen, 1999; Daly, Wiseman, & Wilson, 1997), it may increase the risk of partner-killing by women. For example, a woman might kill her current partner after discovering he has abused her children from a previous partner (Barnard et al., 1982; Browne, 1987; Chimbos, 1978; Daniel & Harris, 1982; Goetting, 1987; Jones, 1980; Jurik & Winn, 1990; Totman, 1978; Wilbanks, 1983). Relative to men in marital relationships, men in cohabiting relationships therefore may incur greater homicide risk not because of something unique to the cohabiting relationship but because of a coalescence of risk factors known to increase the risk of partner-killing. The national-level homicide databases used in this research and in the Canadian research do not include information about most of these risk factors. Future work might examine the relative importance of cohabitation and other homicide risk factors in smaller-scale databases that code all these variables at the incident level.

Among married men in Canada and the United States, younger men are at greatest risk for being killed by their partners. Among cohabiting men in both countries, in contrast, middle-aged men are at greatest risk for being killed by their partners. These relationship-differentiated age-risk patterns have been replicated for women in Canada (Daly & Wilson, 1988) and the United States (Shackelford, in press). Previous research has addressed the greater risk of spousal homicide for youthful men and women (e.g., Daly & Wilson, 1988; Shackelford, 2000; Shackelford et al., 2000). No previous work has addressed why middle-aged men and women in cohabiting relationships incur the greatest risk of being killed by their partners. Daly and Wilson (1988) hypothesize that "middle-aged [cohabiting couples] are exceptionally likely to have children from previous unions. . . . Small or grown, residing with the couple or not, such children might be a major source of discord" (p. 213). This hypothesis has not yet been tested empirically.

Among married and cohabiting couples in Canada and the United States, men partnered to much older or much younger

women are at greater risk for being killed by their partners than are men partnered to same-age women. This pattern of results has been replicated for women in Canada (e.g., Daly & Wilson, 1988) and the United States (e.g., Shackelford, 2000, in press; Shackelford et al., 2000). Daly and Wilson (1988, p. 210) offered two hypotheses for this pattern of results. First, "the effect could in principle reflect nothing more than the greater risk of mutual misunderstanding across an increasing generation gap." Second, "the population of couples with unusual age differences, like any population defined by unusual behavior, contains a disproportionate number of [peculiar people]. . . . People who are [partnered] to people much older or younger than themselves may be at high risk for involvement in *all* sorts of trouble, including [homicides other than partner-killings]." Both hypotheses await empirical evaluation.

In summary, the current research contributes to the literature on partner-killing by replicating with a national-level U.S. database key findings produced by analyses of a national-level Canadian database (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Wilson & Daly, 1994; Wilson et al., 1993). Although several important questions remain to be answered by future work, the current research is a small step toward a better understanding of partner-killing by women.

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