

Men's Health Network

Health Data Summary

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FAMILY VIOLENCE <> FV 118

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Justice Report Reflects Dual Nature of Spousal Homicide **Mothers Most Likely to Murder Their Children**

A report issued today by the Department of Justice indicates that men and women are equally capable of committing spousal homicide.¹ The study consists of a sampling from the 75 largest counties representing over 1/2 of the murders in the country, and excludes cases where no charges were filed because of credible claims of self defense or other excuse. The murders were committed in 1988 or earlier and at least one murder defendant in the case was disposed by the court in 1988. Not included are cases of negligent manslaughter, involuntary manslaughter, or attempted murder.²

If a parent murdered his or her child:

- the murderer was most often the mother (55%) rather than the father (45%) (pg. 1)
- 78% of the child victims were 11 years of age or younger (pg. 6)
- mothers killed sons (64%) more often than they killed daughters (36%) (pp. 1, 4)
- fathers killed sons (48%) and daughters (52%) with approximately equal frequency (pp. 1, 4)
- the murder was preceded by child abuse in 79% of the cases (pg. 5)

When only those persons charged with murder are counted, data reveals that:³

- 41% of the murderers were women who killed their husbands (pg. 1)
- 59% were men who killed their wives (pg. 1)
- 56% of defendants had a prior criminal record (pg. 1)

Among black families:

- 53% of the killers were men who killed their wives (pg. 1)
- 47% were women who killed their husbands (pg. 1)

Implications for prevention:

- Children living in abusive families should be monitored more closely with priority given to those children whose parents have a criminal record.
- Society must recognize that women are equal partners in the cycle of family violence.
- Courts must begin to order treatment for women who commit an act of family violence.
- Parents must be taught methods to discipline young children without resorting to violence.
- Mothers must learn disciplinary techniques which recognize that boys are as fragile as girls.

¹ NCJ-143498. Murder in Families.

² Some infant and young child deaths might usually be included in this group, but are omitted from NCJ-143498.

³ It is unclear whether the data reflect women who hire or entice someone to kill their spouse, a rather common phenomena. If the data do not, then including those women would give a ratio nearer 50-50.