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Suicide Far From Home: The Concept of Transjurisdictional Suicide

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ABSTRACT: A review of a series of eleven persons who committed suicide in a city long distances from home is presented, and the concept of transjurisdictional suicide is introduced. Those eleven cases suggest a high likelihood that the victim will be found in a hotel or motel bed by a hotel/motel employee within a day of check-in; the victim will be a white male who drove to the city and who lived in a hometown closely associated with an urban center which is within a day's drive and on an interstate route connecting the hometown to the city selected; the victim will be older than twenty-one years, married or never married but not divorced or widowed, and will not have been born in the state where death occurred; a suicide message will be found, and a specific reason for selecting a given city will not be apparent.

KEYWORDS: criminalistics, suicide

During the investigation of suicidal deaths in Fulton County, Georgia, it became apparent that approximately 12% of suicides committed in the county were done so by persons who were not residents of the county. Two thirds of those were coincidental; the victim committed suicide near home, the workplace, or some other location where crossing into the county occurred by circumstance rather than design. We have termed such suicides as "juxtajurisdictional." The remaining victims (4% of all suicides) came from more distant home sites and apparently came to the area specifically to commit suicide or decided to kill themselves shortly after arrival. The authors refer to such deaths as "transjurisdictional suicides," and are unaware of any such series in the forensic science literature. The present paper is a review of eleven transjurisdictional suicides which occurred during a three-year period.

Methods

The case reports of suicidal deaths occurring in Fulton County between October 1982 and September 1985 were reviewed. A case was included in the series if (1) the decedent was not a resident of Fulton County or a geographically adjacent county at the time suicide occurred, (2) the decedent did not commit suicide at his place of employment or while legitimately working, and (3) the decedent was not a "transient" using Fulton County as a temporary home.

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Results and Discussion

Eleven cases met the criteria, and accounted for 4% of all suicides during the three-year period. All were white, and nine (82%) were male. Age ranged from twenty-one to sixty-six years, with a median age of thirty-three years. White males were overrepresented compared with a 55% prevalence among all suicide victims in the county [1].

None of the victims were born in Georgia. Only two (18%) lived in Georgia at the time of suicide. The remaining victims resided in Florida (three), Tennessee (two), Alabama (one), South Carolina (one), North Carolina (one), and Kentucky (one). Six (55%) were residing in their state of birth.

Seven of eleven hometowns were located directly on one of three interstate highway routes which course through Fulton County and Atlanta. The remaining four hometowns were either on or immediately adjacent to other interstate routes which directly intersect with the interstate mainlines to Atlanta. Six hometowns were well-known urban centers in their respective states, three were distinct small towns adjacent to larger cities, and two were isolated small towns. Hometown population ranged from 542 to 528 000 with a mean of 138 000 persons. Although two cities had populations greater than the City of Atlanta, the metropolitan Atlanta area had a higher population than the metropolitan area of any of the hometowns. Road distances from the various hometowns to Atlanta ranged from 133 to 450 miles (214 to 724 km) with a mean of 268 miles (431 km), or an average driving time of approximately 5 h. At least eight victims drove to Atlanta; information was not available in three cases.

All eleven victims were found in motel or hotel rooms. Ten were found within a day of check-in by motel employees because of failure to check out or lack of response to room service inquiries. One, who had been missing for four days, was found after his wife received a note written on motel stationary and notified motel employees.

Six hotel/motel establishments were well-known national chains, and five establishments were local ones. Five were located in the central business district of Atlanta, two in more peripheral business districts, and four on the west to southwest outskirts of the city near major thoroughfares. Assuming that all victims drove directly from their hometowns to the establishment in which they were found, five drove to the central city, three stopped at the first portion of the city they encountered, and three drove through or around the city to the opposite side from which they came.

Within the hotel/motel rooms, eight victims (73%) were found in bed, two on the floor, and one on the toilet. Seven victims (64%) died of gunshot wounds; of the seven, four died of gunshot wounds to the head and three died of chest wounds. The remaining victims died of drug overdoses: two from antidepressants, one from salicylates, and one from polypharmacy.

Five victims were never married, and five were married at the time of suicide. Only one was divorced, and none were widowed. Four of five who were not married were twenty-four years of age or less; the other was thirty-three.

Eight victims (73%) left a suicide note or message in some form, a much higher rate than the 23% reported in the literature and in our own experience [2]. Five left handwritten notes on paper in their motel room. One left a note written with soap on a mirror, one mailed a written note to his spouse, and another left a tape-recorded message at home for the spouse. The content of the notes was diverse and gave no direct reasons for committing suicide in Atlanta. However, one note made specific mention of intent to conceal the suicide from a daughter, another expressed a purpose of avoiding hometown media exposure, and a third expressed dissatisfaction with the hometown environment.

Occupations of the victims were diverse. Interestingly, one was a motel manager and one was a motel clerk.

Blood ethanol was detected in six cases (55%), with a positive range of 30 to 329 mg/dL. Two of the four drug-related deaths were combined with ethanol.

Illicit drugs and paraphernalia were found in three cases (27%). In two of those cases, evidence suggested that the victim may have been involved in illicit drug trafficking.

A history of previous suicide attempts was discovered in only two cases.

The number of cases in this series is admittedly small. However, there is evidence that some or all of the following may constitute a partial profile of persons who elect to commit suicide far from home.

High Likelihood

1. The victim will be found in a hotel or motel by hotel/motel employees.
2. The victim will be white and male.
3. The victim comes from a hometown which is either an urban center or is closely associated with one.
4. The victim's hometown is on an interstate highway route which connects the hometown to the city selected for suicide.
5. The victim drove to the city selected for suicide, and the hometown is within a day's drive of that city.
6. The victim will be found in the central city area or side of the city closest to the hometown.
7. The victim will be found within one day of check-in to a hotel or motel.
8. A suicide note or message will be found.
9. The victim will be found in bed.
10. The victim is married or was never married. If never married, the victim is young.
11. The victim is older than 21 years of age.
12. The victim was not born in the state where suicide occurred.
13. The decedent is not divorced or widowed.
14. A specific reason for why the victim chose a particular city for suicide will not be apparent.

The finding of illicit drugs and paraphernalia in three of eleven cases indicates that a thorough search of the death scene should be made for such items. Their presence may suggest a cause, motive, and manner of death, as well as insight into the person's lifestyle.

The authors have presented a series of suicides which share some characteristic features, among which is their transjurisdictional nature. The above list of features is offered as a "checklist" for comparison to similar cases in other jurisdictions. It may well be that transjurisdictional suicides in other jurisdictions have similarities to each other which differ from those in Atlanta as a result of local social and geographical considerations. Further study is needed to clarify the characteristics of persons who chose to kill themselves away from home and to better understand the circumstances and psychodynamics of suicide.

References

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