

## TECHNICAL NOTE

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# Homicide Victim/Offender Relationship in Florida Medical Examiner District 8\*

**ABSTRACT:** This study examined the correlations between victim/offender relationship and three variables: motive, weapon choice, and number of injuries inflicted. Empirical relationship and motive categories were used. The sample consisted of 57 intentional homicide cases from Florida Medical Examiner District 8 between the years 1992 and 1996. Relationships were divided into primary and secondary categories. Primary relationships included intimates, relatives, and friends; secondary relationships included acquaintances and strangers. Motives were classified as romantic dispute, argument/conflict, revenge, or felony type; weapons as firearm or contact; and number of injuries inflicted as single or multiple. A significant correlation was found between victim/offender relationship and homicide motive; however, the revenge and felony type motive categories did not differ. Unexpectedly, no correlation was found between victim/offender relationship and either weapon choice or number of injuries inflicted. Further study is needed of the interactions between homicide victim/offender relationship and motive, weapon selection, and number of injuries inflicted.

**KEYWORDS:** forensic science, homicide, victimology, victim/offender relationship, motive, weapon

In 1958, Wolfgang published his seminal work, *Patterns in Criminal Homicide*, in which he analyzed police records for 588 cases of criminal homicide in Philadelphia between 1948 and 1952 (1). Although focused mainly on victim and offender demographics, this work also examined victim/offender relationship. Relationships were defined as either primary (e.g., family, friends, spouses) or non-primary (e.g., acquaintances, strangers, enemies). For 63% of these cases, the victim/offender relationship was primary. In those cases involving a concurrent felony (32 of the 588), over three-fourths of them occurred between strangers.

More recent homicide studies have addressed not only victim/offender relationship but also crime motive and how these two characteristics are related. In general, both relationships and motives are dichotomized. Relationships are commonly classified as either stranger versus non-stranger (2,3) or primary versus secondary (4–6). Likewise, motives are classified as expressive/impulsive in nature (emotionally-based, typically anger) or instrumental in nature (i.e., pursuit of gain, commonly financial) (6). Traditionally, primary or non-stranger homicides are associated with expressive motives, while stranger or secondary relationship homicides are often identified as occurring in conjunction with other crimes (e.g., robberies, burglaries), and thus are associated with instrumental motives. (7,8). However, the stranger-instrumental link has been brought into question. Riedel and Zahn (9) found that one-third to one-half of stranger homicides did not involve concurrent felonies. Decker (6) found similar difficulties in associating stranger homicides with concurrent felonies.

In his study of police records from 1985 to 1989 in St. Louis, Decker (6) examined 792 murder cases for “deviant” homicides. The term deviant means they departed from the usual correlation of primary relationship homicides with expressive motives and secondary relationship homicides with instrumental motives. His expressive motive category was similar to other studies, but his instrumental category was expanded to include the desire to gain control over the victim. His results—28% of instrumental motives were associated with primary relationships and 46% of expressive motives were associated with secondary relationships—challenged conventional beliefs concerning the association between motive and relationship categories.

Decker (6) also noted a large percentage of his secondary-expressive homicides contained elements of revenge. This departure from expected relationship-motive associations is further confounded if revenge is considered instrumental rather than expressive in nature. Felson (10) pointed out that revenge in love triangles could be considered both instrumental and expressive. Revenge carried out against a rival can involve both an expressive motive (e.g., anger, fear of loss) and an instrumental one (e.g., elimination of the rival). A motive category specifically devoted to revenge proves useful in helping to avoid this source of confusion.

There is also justification for the use of an “intimate” or “romantic dispute” category to allow a distinction to be made between conflicts of an intimate nature and those occurring between non-intimates. Intimates (i.e., lovers) typically face more complicated issues in their relationships than non-intimates, and the emotional intensity in romantic disputes commonly exceeds that found in arguments between friends. Moreover, the considerable number of studies focusing on intimate partner violence reveals a professional interest in homicides of this nature (11–15).

Research assessing the correlation between victim/offender relationship and weapon choice or number of injuries inflicted is scarce. Most studies addressing weapon choice have done so in relation to

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offender demographics. For instance, Weisheit (15) found that female homicide offenders tend to use firearms. Gilliland et al. (16) reported that men were more likely to employ the use of a firearm in episodes of intimate partner violence than were women: 72% and 59% respectively.

Regarding injuries, Heller et al. (17) reviewed 328 court-ordered psychiatric examinations of offenders from 1969 to 1975 in their study of victim/offender relationship and injury severity. They found a close relationship between victim and offender is associated with heightened brutality and greater injury severity to the victim. Similarly, Wolfgang (11) concluded that spouse murders are more brutal than any other murders. These findings suggest a positive correlation between closer victim/offender relationship and injury severity.

The current study examined the correlations between homicide victim/offender relationship and three variables: motive, weapon choice, and number of injuries inflicted. Several modifications to the categories used in prior studies to assess the correlation between victim/offender relationship and homicide motive were applied. Motives traditionally considered expressive in nature were designated as "argument/conflict," except those of a romantic nature were separated into their own category, "romantic dispute." Instrumental motives were deemed "felony type." Retaliation, both expressive and instrumental in nature, was addressed through the "revenge" category.

It was hypothesized that the correlation between victim/offender relationship and motive would be similar to that found in previous studies: argument and conflict homicides would occur mostly in primary relationships, while felony type and revenge killings would have a higher frequency in secondary relationships. Firearms were expected to prevail as the weapon of choice in all relationship categories due to their lethality and ubiquity, and to also be used more frequently in secondary relationships. It was anticipated that the number of injuries inflicted would also reflect the victim/offender relationship, with primary relationships being more likely to be result in multiple injuries.

## Materials and Methods

### Categories

The relationship categories used in this study were primary and secondary. Primary relationships consisted of intimates, relatives, and friends. Secondary relationships included acquaintances and strangers. Not all previous studies have included acquaintances in the secondary category (2,3). Some researchers have placed acquaintances in the primary category, leaving the distinction between the two categories dependent upon whether the victim knew the offender or not. Their reasoning follows the assumption that stranger homicides usually occur in conjunction with other felonies and, therefore, are instrumental in nature, whereas non-stranger homicides are expressive in nature, reflecting more intense relationships/interactions (1,7,8,18). In the current study, acquaintances are included with strangers in the secondary relationship category because the emotional bonds connecting intimates, relatives, and friends were considered to be relatively strong, in contrast to the weak or absent bonds characterizing acquaintances and strangers respectively.

The four motive categories in this study were romantic dispute, argument/conflict, revenge and felony type. This deviates somewhat from previous analyses of crime motives in an attempt to more clearly understand the primary incentive for each of the homicides. Romantic dispute, by default, falls into the intimate relationship

category. However, it was considered necessary to differentiate romantic disputes from other conflicts due to the more complex and intense emotional connections in these relationships. Most murder/suicides fall into the romantic dispute category (19,20). Argument/conflict homicides and revenge killings are self-explanatory. Felony type murders were defined as those homicides motivated by criminal gain.

Weapons were defined as firearm, contact, or combination. Contact weapons included hands, feet, knives, bludgeons, etc. and imply a greater personal involvement by the offender while committing the homicide. Number of injuries inflicted was rated as either single or multiple.

The location of injuries was also examined, being categorized as head/trunk, extremities, and breast/groin. These location categories were devised in an attempt to examine potential signs of the emotional meaning behind the injury infliction. For instance, injuries to the breasts or genitals could betray a sexual component. However, of the 57 victims in this study, none presented any injuries to the breast/groin area, and only two showed any signs of intentional injury to the extremities—both were gunshot wounds to the knees. Thus, injury location could not be assessed as a variable in this investigation.

### Sample

Florida operates on a medical examiner system, consisting of 24 medical examiner districts. District 8 encompasses six counties in North-Central Florida, a mostly rural to semi-rural region with low population-density areas and small towns. An average of 290,000 people inhabited District 8 between 1992 and 1996 (21). During this period, 177 deaths classified as homicides were examined at the District 8 Office of the Medical Examiner. Ten of these were state-mandated executions, leaving 167 "classical" homicides.

Victim data were collected at the Florida District 8 Office of the Medical Examiner from numerous public-record sources, including original autopsy reports and diagrams, supplemental reports such as those submitted by anthropological and entomological consultants, death investigator's reports, police reports, newspaper articles, etc. Offender data were collected at the Florida Circuit 8 Office of the State Attorney from sources including court transcripts, testimony of offenders and witnesses, attorneys' notes, depositions, supplemental reports, police reports, arrest records, etc. Also, the Chief Assistant State Attorney occasionally provided corroboration of the data. Using this information, narratives were created for each of the homicides to allow for classification of motive independent of victim/offender relationship.

Of the 167 classical homicides in District 8 between 1992 and 1996, a number of cases had to be eliminated to confidently obtain a relevant sample of intentional, non-accidental murders. For example, 45 motor vehicle accident cases were eliminated. Other cases were dropped due to the following reasons: being accidental in nature, lack of a suspect, indeterminate motive, being justifiable homicides, and insufficient or missing data.

The final sample included 57 homicide cases. Mean age of the victims was 38.6 years (range 17 to 83); mean age of offenders was not calculated due to data source limitations. Seventy percent of victims and 52% of identified offenders were male. There was no significant association between race and gender in the victims ( $\chi^2$ ;  $p = 0.138$ ). Table 1 provides the number and percentage for the four categories analyzed in this study: relationship, motive, weapon choice, and number of injuries.

TABLE 1—Distribution of relationship, motive, weapon choice and number of injuries (N = 57).

	N	%
Relationship		
Primary	25	43.9
Secondary	32	56.1
Motive		
Romantic dispute	10	17.5
Argument/conflict	25	43.9
Revenge	11	19.3
Felony type	11	19.3
Weapon Choice		
Firearm	33	57.9
Contact	22	38.6
Combination	2	3.5
Number of Injuries		
Single	24	42.1
Multiple	33	57.9

TABLE 2—Victim/offender relationship and motive.\*

	Primary		Secondary		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Romantic dispute	10	17.5	0	0	10	17.5
Argument conflict	12	21.1	13	22.8	25	43.9
Revenge**	2	3.5	9	15.8	11	19.3
Felony type**	1	1.8	10	17.5	11	19.3
Total	25	43.9	32	56.1	57	100.0

\* Relationship and motivation are associated ( $p < .001$ ).

\*\* Revenge and felony type do not differ ( $p = 0.423$ ).

## Results and Discussion

### Victim/Offender Relationship and Motive

Victim/offender relationship and motive for the 57 homicide events in this study are illustrated in Table 2. A significant correlation existed between victim/offender relationship and homicide motive ( $\chi^2 = 21.32$ ,  $p < .001$ ), although revenge and felony type did not differ ( $p = 0.423$ ).

An essentially even distribution was found between the argument/conflict homicide motive group and the two relationship categories of primary and secondary. This result is consistent with Decker's (6) position that arguments are the result of situational characteristics between victim and offender and can occur in any relationship category.

One possible area of bias for the results presented in Table 2 lies in the romantic dispute motive category. Because romantic disputes are limited to intimates and therefore primary relationships, the results could have been skewed due to all of these homicides being assigned to the primary category. When the romantic dispute homicides were subsumed under the argument/conflict homicide category, nearly twice as many argument/conflict homicides occurred between individuals in primary relationships as those in secondary relationships (22 primary, 13 secondary). Correlations remained significant during this altered analysis approach using only the three motive categories of argument/conflict (including romantic dispute), revenge, and felony type, and the two relationship categories ( $\chi^2$ ;  $p < .05$ ). When the romantic dispute category was removed altogether, leaving a sample of 47 homicide events, the correlations were still significant ( $\chi^2$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Therefore, correlation between victim/offender relationship and homicide motive

TABLE 3—Victim/offender relationship and weapon choice.\*

	Primary		Secondary		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Firearm	17	29.8	16	28.1	33	57.9
Contact	7	12.3	15	26.8	22	38.6
Combination	1	1.8	1	1.8	2	3.5
Total	25	43.9	32	56.1	57	100.0

\* No significant relationship ( $p = .3479$ ).

TABLE 4—Victim/offender relationship and number of injuries inflicted.\*

	Primary		Secondary		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Single	10	17.5	14	24.6	24	42.1
Multiple	15	26.8	18	31.6	33	57.9
Total	25	43.9	32	56.1	57	100.0

\* No significant relationship ( $p = .7760$ ).

remained significant regardless of any bias introduced by the romantic dispute category.

### Victim/Offender Relationship and Weapon Choice/Number of Injuries

Unexpectedly, no correlation was found between victim/offender relationship and either weapon choice ( $\chi^2 = 2.11$ ,  $p = .3479$ ) or number of injuries inflicted ( $\chi^2 = 0.081$ ,  $p = .7760$ ). See Tables 3 and 4. Firearms were the most commonly used weapon choice for both relationship categories. Of interest was the trend for contact weapons to be used more frequently—nearly twice as often—in secondary relationships ( $N = 16$ ; 50%) than in primary relationships ( $N = 8$ ; 32%), although this did not reach statistical significance. This is contrary to the assumption that more impulsively chosen contact weapons would be used in primary relationship homicides, whereas firearms, with their greater lethality potential, would prevail in secondary relationship homicides.

One factor possibly playing a role in these counterintuitive weapon choice findings is weapon availability. Incidents occurring in primary relationships often happen in the home where both the offender and victim live. Offenders who commit homicides at their own home will be aware of weapon location such as firearms. In contrast, incidents in secondary relationships, particularly those impulsive in nature, may leave the offender in a situation of not having access to a firearm. Moreover, secondary relationship homicides are generally less likely to occur in a home. Therefore, it is suspected that a number of the offenders in secondary relationships in this study may have resorted to personal weapons or those available at the scene. Lester's studies of weapon choice correlations with various factors revealed similar results, i.e., a positive correlation between gun ownership and homicide rate (22). In addition, firearm availability was found to have a positive correlation with primary homicide rate but not with secondary homicide rate (23).

Other factors could also have played an important role in these weapon choice findings, like strength differences between victim and offender, skill with a given weapon, impulsivity of the act, and cultural predisposition to weapon choice. In addition, the possible practice of routinely carrying weapons (e.g., knives) by some of these homicide offenders cannot be disregarded. It is apparent that weapon choice involves a number of factors and is only indirectly

related to victim/offender relationship. Additional research on factors influencing weapon choice is needed.

These negative findings on number of injuries inflicted could also have been influenced by various factors. For example, merely attempting to cause injury rather than death, or an impulsive striking out, may explain some of these assaultive acts, particularly for the primary relationships. Thus some offenders may have stopped their assaultive behavior after a single injury to the victim. Furthermore, some impulsive assaults may have been terminated after the first injury was inflicted when the offender grasped the impact of his/her actions. In contrast, premeditated murder is assumed to be associated more frequently with secondary relationships, and the trend of more multiple injury homicides in this category might reflect, at least for some cases, the intent to assure death of the victim.

### Limitations

There are several limitations in this study to be considered. First, a large number of the homicides identified in the state district for the period studied had to be eliminated from the sample for diverse reasons as explained in the Methods. One factor possibly skewing the results pertains to the requirement that the identity of the offender be known. When the victim/offender relationship is secondary in nature, particularly if the victim and offender are strangers to each other, discovery of offender identity may prove difficult. Therefore, secondary relationship homicides may have been under-represented. However, this might be counterbalanced by under-representation of primary relationship homicide cases where the true offender is not considered a suspect. At times, discovery of an offender's identity can be delayed until long after a homicide investigation begins if the victim and offender had a close personal relationship and the conclusion is initially drawn by investigating officers that intimates, relatives, or friends are not at fault (24). Moreover, the categorization of human relationships is challenging due to the wide spectrum of people's social interactions and emotional attachments. The authors attempted to minimize these potentially confounding influences by eliminating all cases for which relationship status could not be clearly defined. It was felt that a smaller but more homogenous and defined sample would provide the most meaningful results given the aims undertaken. Harris (25) noted that the misclassification of homicides has historically limited our ability to undertake comprehensive, meaningful analyses.

Second, the methodology of this study did not allow for interviews of the offenders themselves in order to gain an understanding from their perspective of what motivated them and how they chose the weapons they used. The collection of such data in future related studies would be a rich source of information.

Third, reliable information on the mental health, or lack of it, in the perpetrators of these homicides was not available. This would also have been interesting data to consider when looking at such variables as victim-offender relationship, motivation to kill, weapon choice, etc.

Lastly, whether the lack of a close personal relationship in the case of acquaintances justifies their inclusion in the secondary relationship category is debatable and merits further consideration. Studies with larger sample sizes could control for this uncertainty by analyzing intimates, relatives, friends, acquaintances and strangers separately.

### Concluding Remarks

The proposition that significant correlations between victim/offender relationship and homicide motive exist is partially

supported by the findings in this study. Romantic dispute and argument/conflict homicides combined occurred more often in primary relationships, whereas felony type and revenge homicides occurred with greater frequency in secondary relationships. However, this investigation did not find that correlations existed between victim/offender relationship and either weapon choice or number of injuries inflicted. Firearms, either alone or in combination with another weapon, prevailed as the weapon of choice in 61.4% of the homicides in this study. Contact weapons were used over twice as often in secondary relationships than in primary relationships, possibly due to outside factors such as weapon availability, although this finding did not reach statistical significance. Both single injury and multiple injury homicides occurred slightly more frequently in secondary relationships than primary relationships, but not to a significant degree.

Future research could examine additional factors contributing to weapon choice and availability, such as whether the incident was planned or unplanned, the location of the incident (i.e., whether the homicide occurred in the home of the offender), and whether the weapon was acquired at the scene or brought with the offender (weapons of opportunity versus choice). Additional studies might also benefit by directly examining offender motivation and mental health factors (e.g., the presence of psychopathy, other personality disorders, substance abuse, and psychosis).

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