

# Fact or Fiction? Gender Issues Related to Newspaper Reports of Intimate Partner Homicide

Violence Against Women


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## Abstract

The present study compared newspaper articles reporting female-perpetrated intimate partner violence (IPV) homicides with those reporting male-perpetrated IPV homicides. Domestic violence was not mentioned in 72% of the articles. Female-perpetrated IPV homicide, although relatively rare, was not portrayed as more newsworthy nor did it receive more coverage when compared to male-perpetrated IPV homicide. When analyzing explanations for homicides given in newspaper reports, as well as descriptors used to describe the perpetrator, there was no support found for gender bias in favor of male perpetrators. Female victims were more likely to be portrayed as innocent when compared to males.

## Keywords

domestic homicide, intimate partner violence, newspaper reporting

## Introduction: Intimate Partner Violence-Related Newspaper Coverage

As a public health problem, domestic violence is but a subset of overall violent crime in the United States and constitutes about 33% of all violent crime recorded by police nationwide (Durose et al., 2005). However, in some jurisdictions domestic violence may

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constitute the majority of calls to the police and represent the most common type of felony arrest (Durose et al., 2005; McManus & Dorfman, 2003). In terms of severe violence resulting in death, about 22% of all homicides are domestic murders (Durose et al., 2005) and, once again, some jurisdictions show higher proportions than this. The most common form of domestic violence is intimate partner violence (IPV), or that which occurs between past or present adult intimates. Recent national statistics show that males represent 83% of all spousal murderers and 75% of those who killed a boyfriend or girlfriend (Durose et al., 2005), suggesting that IPV is largely a male-perpetrated problem. However, cultural depictions of IPV, including representations by the news media, may or may not accurately reflect the true shape or tenor of this public health problem.

Studies conducted by McManus and Dorfman (2003) and Sorenson, Manz, and Berk (1998) found that IPV homicides are less likely to be covered in newspapers than homicides committed by strangers, out of proportion to their actual occurrence within the local population. Furthermore, when IPV homicides are reported, they are covered very differently than other homicides because they are often less visible in their placement in the newspaper and are less likely to have humanistic story frames that are sometimes added to news reports to provide depth and context (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Sorenson et al., 1998; Taylor & Sorenson, 2002). In addition, unlike reports concerning other types of homicide, IPV homicide articles seldom provide background issues or use a "hook," referring to the first few sentences in an article used to draw in the reader; also, they are often unemotional in tone (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Sorenson et al., 1998). Citizens, therefore, may not read the article because it does not catch their attention or play on their emotions.

When reporting IPV homicides, stories are often episodic and focus only on that particular incident rather than the broader context of IPV and rarely include expert opinion (Delaware Coalition Against Domestic Violence [DCADV], 2006; Taylor & Sorenson, 2002). As noted above, an IPV homicide is often portrayed as a single event and not reported as the endpoint in a pattern of abuse that has occurred over time (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Websdale, 1998). By presenting stories of violence against women as separate and discrete events, newspapers portray to the public that IPV incidents against women are isolated events, thus denying the widespread nature of IPV in our culture (Carll, 1999; DCADV, 2006; Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence [RICADV], 2000; Websdale & Alvarez, 1997).

Bullock and Cubert (2002) found that out of 230 newspaper articles on domestic violence homicides, less than a quarter actually labeled the incident as domestic violence and only 10% of the articles framed the homicide within the larger context of IPV. Furthermore, almost half (48%) of the articles suggested some type of excuse for IPV perpetrator behavior, and 17% included victim-blaming language. Similarly, a study published by the RICADV in 2000 showed that less than 20% of relevant newspaper articles concerning IPV homicides made clear reference to the specific type of violence involved, while some reporters labeled such homicides as a "family tragedy" or framed IPV homicides as unpredictable or as the result of a tragic "love story" even with evidence of prior IPV incidents in hand. In 2006, the DCADV released a report that showed out of 30 newspaper articles concerning IPV homicides only 10% referred to domestic violence, about a quarter