Women With Children Sired by Previous Partners Incur Excess Risk of Uxoricide

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Information about uxoricides (killings of wives) in one Canadian city between 1974 and 1995 was extracted from media reports. Among those slain women who were mothers of coresident minor children, half had children sired by former partners, compared to just 7% of comparable such mothers in the population at large, yielding an odds ratio of 12.7. This risk factor is likely to be widespread but has not previously been demonstrated because homicide archives typically lack relevant information. Female-initiated separation was apparently a motivational factor in more than half of all uxoricides, and media reports can be informative with respect to the timing and circumstances of uxoricide risk in relation to marital dissolution.

There are both theoretical and empirical reasons for suspecting that marital conflict and violence may be elevated in stepfamilies (Daly & Wilson, 1996a).[1] The children in such families are abused and killed at very much higher rates than those living with only genetic parents (Daly & Wilson, 1988,1996b), so mistreatment of stepchildren is itself a likely source of conflict between the step-parent and the genetic parent. However, whether spousal homicide rates also are elevated in stepfamilies is unknown, although

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incidental information in published homicide studies suggests that they are. Lundsgaarde (1977), for example, provided brief narrative accounts of 33 spousal homicides occurring in Houston in one year and happened to mention the presence of a stepchild in 11,even though this was not a subject he explicitly addressed. Stepfamilies are also surely overrepresented in Chimbos's (1978) sample of Canadian cases and in Polk's (1994) Australian study, but it is impossible to say to what degree.

There is one relevant study of nonlethal wife assault. Daly, Singh, and Wilson (1993) reported that women with children sired by former partners sought refuge from assaultive husbands in a Canadian women's shelter at a per capita rate about five times greater than did same-age mothers whose children were all sired by the present husband. One cannot assume, however, that uxoricide (wife killing) will exhibit similar differentials because demographic risk patterns for uxoricide differ in some details from those for nonlethal wife assault (Wilson, Johnson, & Daly, 1995).

An impediment to investigating this issue is that homicide archives lack information on reproductive histories of killers and victims. Even police investigative files commonly omit the information needed to distinguish children of the present union from stepchildren. Census bureaus also have neglected this distinction, with the result that population-at-large information is scarce and of questionable validity. Nevertheless, it is possible to address this issue at the local level. In particular, we report here a study of uxoricide risk and steprelationship in a Canadian city for which extensive information on all homicide cases is available in the media and for which relevant survey data exist on the prevalence of stepfamilies.

METHOD

Uxoricide in Canada

The federal agency Statistics Canada maintains an archive (the "Homicide Survey") of all criminal homicides known to have occurred in Canada since 1974. This victim-based data file contains codings of police jurisdiction and date; the sex, age, and

marital status of victim and killer; their relationship to each other (categories include "wife, " "husband, " "common-law wife, " "common-law husband, " "lover, " "close friend" and "acquaintance," among others); whether the killer committed suicide; ostensible motives; and various other attributes of the time, place, and mode of the homicide. Separated and divorced couples are coded as "husband" and "wife," with the fact of their estrangement conveyed by the codings of their marital statuses. Unfortunately, however, there is no code for former de facto (common- law) marriages, which apparently have been inconsistently coded as "lover," "close friend," and so on, so it is impossible to obtain an estimate of their numbers.

According to this archive, 1,429 Canadian women were killed by their registered or common-law husbands between 1974 and 1992. Mean uxoricide rates for this 19-year period are about 7 homicides per million coresiding registered-marriage wives per annum, 41 per million separated registered-marriage wives per annum (Wilson & Daly, 1993), and 61 per million coresiding common-law marriage wives per annum (Wilson, Daly, & Wright, 1993). Although there has been little temporal variation over this period, the general trend has been slightly downward, and this has continued through 1995.

Uxoricide in the City of Hamilton (1974-1992)

The regional municipality of Hamilton-Wentworth is a predominantly urban policing district centered on the heavily industrialized city of Hamilton, Ontario. Hamilton-Wentworth had a population of 425,057 people (1.8% of the population of Canada) in 1976 and 470,245 (1.71% of the population of Canada) in 1991. According to the Statistics Canada Homicide Survey, Hamilton-Wentworth's 215 homicides between 1974 and 1992 constituted 1.72% of the national total, and the region's 24 uxoricides in that 19-year period constituted 1.68% of the national total. Thus, at least in terms of gross rates of homicide, Hamilton-Wentworth is representative of the nation as a whole.

A registered marriage between victim and killer characterized 19 of the 24 Hamilton uxoricides in the Statistics Canada database (79%), whereas only 5 (21%) involved common-law relationships.

For Canada as a whole, the corresponding percentages were 64% registered and 36% common law. Two of the 19 registered-marriage couples were recorded as divorced. Four of the Hamilton cases (17%) were recorded as murder-suicides, compared to 26% of all Canadian uxoricides. Three of the 24 Hamilton cases were "familicides" in which one or more children of the victim were also slain; this was true of only 4% of uxoricides for the nation as a whole (Wilson, Daly, & Daniele, 1995).

To protect confidentiality, individual case information from the Statistics Canada archive cannot be accessed and record linked with other information sources, such as the media sources used in this study. However, the summary information reported in the preceding paragraph is sufficient for us to confirm that the local media cover all uxoricides. For the study reported here, the city's daily newspaper, the *Hamilton Spectator*, provided the principal source of information on local cases, with some supplementary information coming from other public record sources, especially an investigative article specifically concerned with some of the city's uxoricides, published in *Hamilton This Month* magazine. Systematic examination of the *Spectator* between 1974 and 1992 revealed 19 cases of women killed by men inferred to be their registered-marriage husbands on the basis of either a direct reference to their marriage or a common surname and the, words *husband or wife*. This matches the number expected from the Statistics Canada archives (More generally, Statistics Canada's numbers for all homicides in Hamilton-Wentworth in a given year generally match the number derived from reports in the *Spectator*. Because homicide incidents occur in Hamilton-Wentworth less than once a month, on average, it is perhaps not surprising that there is at least some coverage of every case.) Also matching expectations was the fact that 4 of the 19 wife killers were reported to have committed suicide in the same incident and that the victim and killer were legally divorced in two cases. We conclude that local newspaper coverage is accurate in its reportage of registered-marriage uxoricides. Accordingly, we feel justified in treating the media reports as the complete set of local solved uxoricides (rather than a potentially biased sample) when analyzing additional information missing from the national homicide archives such as family composition. For this purpose, we include an additional 5

cases occurring between 1993 and 1995, bringing the total sample of registered-marriage uxoricides to 24 in a 22-year period.

Unlike the situation with the registered-marriage uxoricides, the newspaper contained more cases of women being killed by apparent de facto husbands than would be expected on the basis of Statistics Canada data. Although this national archive indicated that only five such cases had occurred in Hamilton-Wentworth between 1974 and 1992, the *Hamilton Spectator* reported on eight cases of women being killed by men with whom they dwelt and with whom they were apparently sexually intimate but to whom they were not married. This disparity accords with Crawford and Gartner's (1992) claim that the "spousal" category in the Statistics Canada archive represents an undercount of what they call "intimate femicides," not because of coding errors but because of the fuzzy-boundedness of marital-like relationships. For present purposes, we treat coresident couples, but not separately residing "boyfriend or girlfriend" relationships, as de facto marrieds, because coresidence is also the criterion for marital-like relationships in the available population-at-large survey described later. No additional cases of de facto uxoricides were found between 1993 and 1995, resulting in a final sample of 32 victims of uxoricide--24 registered-marriage and 8 de facto. Although this is a relatively small sample, it represents the entire population of uxoricides within the area during the period covered by the analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Children of Former Unions

Media reports on the 24 registered-marriage killings indicated that 15 women were mothers. The victim's childlessness was explicit in four cases (including one where the killer had children of a prior union), leaving five unknown. Noteworthy in the pre- sent context is that at least 7 of the 15 victims known to be mothers had children sired by previous partners. (Another was pregnant when she married her eventual killer, but presumably with his child.) In addition, 5 of the 8 common-law uxoricide victims had

TABLE 1
Paternity of Coresiding Children Less Than 18 Years of Age: Women in Hamilton-Wentworth Population Survey (1983)[2] Compared With Uxoricide Victims in the Same Region (1974-1995)

Paternity of Children	Population Survey	Uxoricide Victims
Sample *N*	383	16
Present partner's only	355	8
One or more stepchildren	28	8
Percentage with stepchildren	7.3	50.0
Odds ratio[3] = 12.7 95% confidence interval = 4.4-36.3		

2. According to 1983 survey conducted by Daly and Wilson (1985)
3. Odds ratio and 95% confidence intervals are computed following Morris and Gardner's (1989) model for an unmatched case control study

children, and in four cases they were clearly progeny of previous partnerships. Altogether, then, at least 11 of the slain women--34% of the total of 32 victims and 55% of the 20 identified as mothers--had children sired by predecessors of the partners who killed them.

Population-at-large information was obtained from a probability sample survey of households containing children in the Hamilton-Wentworth region, conducted by Daly and Wilson (1985) near the midpoint of the homicide sampling period in late 1983. According to that survey, only 7.3% of women living with a male partner and the woman's own children under the age of 18 had a child sired by a former partner. (The proportion of two-"parent" households with stepfathers was virtually unrelated to census tract income or family size, eliminating the possibility that these might be confounds responsible for spurious differences between household types.) Limiting the uxoricide sample to comparable cases-that is, to those women who had coresiding children under the age of 18 leaves 16 such victims, of whom 8 (50%) had former partners' children. If 0.073 is then taken as the chance probability that such a slain mother would have had a child of a former union, the observed incidence of 8 out of 16 represents a highly significant excess ($p < .00001$ by binomial test). Mothers of such children are estimated to be 12.7 times more likely to be slain than those whose coresiding children under the age of 18 were all sired by the present partner (see Table 1).

Besides the 32 uxoricides, there were seven cases of women killing their husbands in Hamilton-Wentworth between 1974 and 1995. Children under 18 years of age dwelt with the couple in just two of these seven cases: the female perpetrator's children of a prior union in one case and a child of the present union in the other. Thus, if one considers all spousal homicides rather than just uxoricides, it is still the case that exactly half of the 18 female protagonists with coresiding minor children had former partners' children among them. Thus the corresponding odds ratio for spousal homicide is the same as that for uxoricides alone (12.7), with a slightly narrower 95% confidence interval (4.7-34.5).

Uxoricide in the Context of Marital Dissolution

Several of the female victims in this study had ceased to coreside with their killers before their deaths. This fact may appear to complicate the comparisons in Table I because the population-at-large data represent coresiding persons. However, none of the victims had been separated for more than 9 months, so the population-at-large survey may be considered to represent a cross-section of marital partnerships potentially at risk during the impending year.

Media reports also can shed some light on the timing and circumstances of uxoricide in relation to separation, an important topic on which information is sparse in large homicide archives. Wilson and Daly (1993) reported that the risk of being killed by one's registered-marriage husband was about six times higher for separated Canadian wives than for those still coresiding. They maintained, however, that even this sixfold elevation must seriously underestimate risk in the immediate aftermath of separation because the uxoricide rate for separated wives was computed relative to a denominator of all separated women in the population, regardless of the duration of separation, whereas risk apparently dissipates with time. Wilson and Daly (1993) reported that about half of the separated uxoricide victims in samples from Chicago and New South Wales, Australia were slain within 2 months of separation and 85% to 91% within a year.

The Hamilton cases also indicate a brief period of extreme risk. Nine estranged registered-marriage victims had moved out

within the previous 90 days; only one was killed after a longer interval. (In that case, there had been regular contacts because of children. Nine months after separation, the killer entered the victim's home with a shotgun, allowed their children and other bystanders to leave, and then killed his wife and himself.) In all 10 cases, reports indicated that the wife had initiated the separation and that the husband had continued to assault her, harass her, or plead with her to return. One woman was slain 4 days after moving out, and another was killed while walking to work from a shelter to which she had moved 5 days previously. Another couple shared the marital home while divorcing; the homicide occurred 11 days after the divorce was finalized while the victim was packing her belongings. Three more women were killed while retrieving belongings from the marital home after having moved out within the previous month. Public agencies were aware of threats in at least four of these recently separated cases: besides the woman who had sought refuge in a shelter, two were in possession of restraining orders against their husbands because of prior threats and assaults, and a fourth was killed by a husband already awaiting trial for a prior assault against her.

Moreover, according to the media reports, conflicts over separation were relevant in several cases in which the husband and wife were still coresiding, in addition to the 10 who had actually separated. One wife was shot while sleeping a week after demanding a divorce. A second was allegedly planning to leave, or so her killer believed, when he drowned their son in the bath while she was at work and stabbed her to death on her return home. A third was beaten to death in a purported direct response to her threat to leave, and a fourth was killed after making an appointment with a lawyer to discuss the logistics of marital dissolution. Finally, a familicidal killer of his wife and two children denied the crime, claiming that they had run away with another man, and although his story persuaded no one, there was other evidence that the wife's wish to separate had been under discussion before the killings.

Thus conflict over female-initiated separation was of apparent relevance to at least 15 of the 24 registered-marriage uxoricides. Three other cases involved elderly couples apparently unable to cope with failing health, and details were too sparse to guess the issues of contention in most of the remaining 6 cases. Three of the

eight de facto Hamilton victims were also trying to leave their killers, and one of these women was killed immediately after her ex-partner was released from a 16-day jail term that he had served for an assault on her.

This may seem a remarkable prevalence of conflict over the single issue of separation. That it is not unusual, however, is evidenced by studies in other countries that have produced similar results (Barnard, Vera, Vera, & Newman, 1982; Campbell, 1992; Showalter, Bonnie, & Roddy, 1980; Wallace, 1986).

CONCLUSIONS

Male sexual proprietariness, aroused either by women's efforts to leave unsatisfactory marriages or by adulterous or potentially adulterous interactions with other males, is by far the leading ostensible motivational factor in violence against wives, especially lethal violence (Wilson & Daly, 1996). An evolutionary psychological perspective suggests that this motive is an especially powerful one because the fitness of our male ancestors depended crucially on sexual and reproductive control of women in a social milieu of rival men. The effect of male rivalry that matters in evolutionary time is differential paternity, and it is therefore not surprising that marital conflict is in general reduced by the presence of children but exacerbated when those children are the products of prior unions (Daly & Wilson, 1996a).

This study provides the first demonstration that the presence of children from prior unions is associated with elevated spousal homicide risk. The data set is small and local, but the effect is large and highly significant. We predict that this association will prove to be ubiquitous. Investigation of how steppaternal status may influence the psychology of jealous possessiveness and the linkage of this emotion to an increased risk of uxoricide could be quite valuable.

NOTE

1.Throughout this article, 'stepparents" include all persons in loco parentis to a child by virtue of coresident marital partnership with the child's genetic parent, regardless of whether the marriage is registered or de facto.

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