



SIEC ALERT

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SIEC ALERT is a topical review of current literature relevant to suicide prevention.

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Homicide Followed by Suicide

Gillespie and colleagues(1998) point out that homicide is the only crime that regularly results in offenders taking their own lives following the act. Although both suicidal and homicidal behaviours seem opposite in nature, murder-suicides reveal the possibility that one can be suicidal and homicidal at the same time.

In an analysis of 16,245 homicides in Chicago, Steven Stack tested the hypothesis that the closer the ties between offender and victim in a homicide, the greater the ensuing guilt and the greater the likelihood of suicide. Stack found that killing an ex-spouse/lover increased the risk of suicide the most—12.68 times, followed by 10.28 times for killing a child, 8 times for killing a spouse, 6.11 times for killing a girlfriend or boyfriend, and 1.88 times for killing a friend.

Dominant Themes in Cases of Murder-Suicide

In reviewing prior studies on murder-suicide, Stack summarized the following dominant themes that typify a murder-suicide incident:

- The genesis of homicide-suicide lies in a frustrated, chaotic, intimate, long-term personal relationship. Homicide-suicide rarely happens among strangers or persons in short-term relationships.
- A key pattern in the chaotic relationship is extreme ambivalence - a vacillation between anger and love.
- Jealousy and morbid jealousy - a delusion that one's sexual partner has been sexually unfaithful.
- The triggering event is often a separation or threatened separation from one's love object.
- Depression - the offender's separation from his or her significant other is often marked by severe depression, and severe depression is also a risk factor for suicide.
- Helplessness - the act is seen as the consequence of unbearable powerlessness.
- Guilt and self-blame - the perpetrator's realization that he has committed the crime produces a suicidal impulse.

Homicide-Suicide in Canada

Although homicides and homicide-suicides receive more media attention than suicides, suicide rates in Canada have been consistently higher than homicide rates. Homicide, the killing of one person by another, is a relatively rare occurrence in Canada and homicides that are followed by the suicide of the offender are even more uncommon.

Of the 503 separate homicide incidents reported to police in 1999, Statistics Canada* reports that 8% (n=40) were murder-suicides. These incidents resulted in the deaths of 52 homicide victims, where the accused, 93% male, also killed themselves.

One in 4 murder-suicide incidents in 1999 involved more than one victim, and the perpetrator was male in each case.

Almost 9 out of ten cases were family-related— findings that are consistent with a 20 year trend.

In 48% of all murder-suicides, men killed their spouse; in 15% of cases, men killed their children. Men killed their spouse and children in 13% of the cases. There were two cases where women killed their children, but none in which women killed their spouse.

(source: Langlois, S., & Morrison, P., **Suicide deaths and suicide attempts, Health Reports**, v. 13, no.2, (January 2002) Catalogue 82-003)

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SIEC SOURCES & RESOURCES

Photocopies are available from SIEC for documents on this list.

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SIEC #1997-0680

Berman, A. L. (1996). Dyadic death: A typology. Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior, 26(4): 342-350.

SIEC# 1993-0676

Buteau, J., Lesage, A. D., et al. (1993). Homicide followed by suicide: A Quebec case series, 1988-1990. Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, 38(8): 552-556.

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Ragaisis, K. M. (1994). Critical incident stress debriefing: A family nursing intervention. Archives of Psychiatric Nursing, 8(1): 38-43.

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Weintraub, P., Hall, H. L., & Pynoos, R. S. Columbine high school shootings: Community response (In M. Shafii & S. L. Shafii (Eds.), School Violence: Assessment, Management, Prevention, (pp.129-161). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2001.

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