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Femicide of Older Women

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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There is a lack of consensus on what age group constitutes "older people", including older women. In Canada, there is no set age at which a person is considered to be a senior; age thresholds may vary depending on a number of factors and range from 55 to 65 years old as a minimum requirement. Despite disagreement in defining seniority, Statistics Canada acknowledges that seniors 65 years and older represent a burgeoning proportion of Canada's population, comprising 16% of the total population in 2011.[i] This percentage will continue to rise with the aging population of 'baby boomers', resulting in increased concerns about their social, physical, and mental vulnerability. It is also necessary to recognize these vulnerabilities to assist in understanding and monitoring crime and violence perpetrated against seniors in Canada.[ii] This article focuses on femicide, or the killing of women, aged 55 years and older in Ontario between 1974 and 2012. Below, this article begins by providing an overall description of the 452 femicide cases involving older women, examining various victim and perpetrator characteristics, the nature of the offence, and the criminal justice response where documented. This is followed by a comparison of the characteristics of women 55 and older to femicide victims aged 18 to 54.

Data for this analysis were drawn from a larger study that examines all femicides and homicides in Ontario from 1974 to 2012.[iii] Data were collected from a number of official and unofficial sources including death records kept by the Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario, Crown Attorney files, court documents, and media coverage. More than 200 variables are included in the database, capturing characteristics of the victim, the perpetrator, case characteristics, and criminal justice outcomes. Drawing from this data, during the 38-year period, there were 2,134 female victims; 452 of which were 55 years and older. While multiple data sources were accessed, information for some variables is often not available, a situation common in these types of studies. As such, several of the variables discussed below are missing information for a significant proportion of the data; therefore, the percentages reported reflect only those cases where information is known.

Description of Femicide Characteristics of Victims 55 years and older

Victim characteristics

Similar to prior research analyzing homicides of older women,[iv] the majority of femicide victims 55 years and older (60%) were in a current marital relationship (i.e. legally married or common-law unions) at the time of the offence (see Table 1). Eighty-one percent were Caucasian or of European descent and over 90 percent had at least one child. Given the age category of the victims, it was expected that most would be out of the labour force. Meeting these expectations, approximately 67 percent of victims were retired. Almost one-third of victims had a prior history of psychiatric treatment and/or hospitalization and just under three percent had documented evidence of attempting suicide prior to their death. With respect to substance use, 17 percent were intoxicated at the time of their death and just under one-quarter had a history of substance abuse. Finally, less than two percent of the cases had information documenting that the victim had a prior criminal record.

Perpetrator characteristics

To display the most accurate description of perpetrator characteristics, this stage of analysis was restricted to femicide cases where a perpetrator had been identified and, therefore, excludes unsolved

cases. With this restriction, there were 405 femicide cases perpetrated against women 55 years and older. There were some parallels, but several differences in the demographic composition of perpetrators of femicide when compared to their victims.

The overwhelming majority were male perpetrators (93%)[1] and, similar to their victims, the majority were in a current marital relationship (61%) (See Table 2). Nearly three-quarters of perpetrators were Caucasian or of European descent and 75 percent had at least one child and this was also similar to patterns among femicide victims. However, differences were evident with respect to employment status. As shown above, femicide victims were most likely to be retired, however, perpetrator employment status displayed wide variation. Specifically, 36 percent were retired, 28 percent were legally employed, and 27 percent were unemployed at the time of the offence. Furthermore, in contrast to their victims, the majority of perpetrators had a history of prior psychiatric treatment or hospitalization (67%), about one quarter committed suicide following the femicide and six percent attempted suicide. However, similar to the victims, the majority of perpetrators did not have a prior criminal record (53%), although the proportion with a record was much higher than victims. Among the 47 percent with a record, 26 percent had a violent record and 21 percent had a nonviolent record. At the time of the homicide, 37 percent of perpetrators were under the influence of alcohol and 66 percent of perpetrators had a history of substance abuse.

Case characteristics

Similar to the preceding section, this stage of the analysis was restricted to cases where the perpetrator has been identified, excluding unsolved cases. Where the victim-perpetrator relationship was known, the majority of femicide cases involved intimate partners (38%) and one quarter of the cases were perpetrated by other family members (i.e., parents, siblings, other kin) (See Table 3). Almost one half of the cases (49%) involved evidence of prior violence in the relationship and almost one third of the cases involved evidence of prior threats made by the perpetrator against the victim. Despite evidence of prior violence and threats made by the perpetrator against the victim, only 27 percent of cases had documented prior police contact. This finding may be explained by previous research which has highlighted that older individuals may be more reluctant or unable to report prior abuse due to fear of further violence or repercussions, mental impairment, feelings of shame, and unfamiliarity of support services available.[v]

Most victims (29%) were beaten to death or subsequently died from complications that arose due to the beating (e.g. pneumonia) while 25 percent of victims were shot and 23 percent were stabbed. Excessive force, defined as the use of multiple methods or repeated use of one method, was apparent in 38 percent of cases. About 33 percent of the cases involved the use of a knife or other bladed weapon, 23 percent involved the use of a firearm, and 24 percent of cases used an alternative type of weapon (i.e. bat, bar, stick); the remaining 21 percent of cases involved no weapon (i.e. hands). Most cases (29%) appeared to be motivated by mental illness or were perceived as mercy killings or suicide-pacts, according to official records.

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[1] There is some debate around the definition of femicide and, with respect to perpetrator gender, whether female perpetrators should be included. We have included all femicide cases regardless of perpetrator's gender for a more comprehensive picture of femicide cases only.

Criminal justice response

Among cases where a perpetrator was identified and the criminal justice response was documented, one-third of perpetrators were charged with second-degree murder; 30 percent were charged with first degree-murder; and approximately 27 percent committed suicide so there were no criminal proceedings (see Table 4). After screening out perpetrators who were not charged criminally, the sample was reduced to 250 cases. Of these cases, over one quarter of perpetrators (28%) were convicted of second-degree murder, 25 percent were found not criminally responsible, and 22 percent were found guilty of manslaughter. When convicted and sentenced, the average sentence length was slightly more than 12 years.

Bivariate comparisons between femicide victims aged 18-54 and 55 and older

In order to address the unique vulnerabilities faced by women 55 years and older, bivariate analyses were conducted to identify which demographic, incident, and criminal justice characteristics distinguished femicide cases of women 55 years and older from cases involving femicide victims aged 18 to 54 years old.

Demographic differences

When comparing the two groups of femicide victims, several significant differences emerged (see Table 1). Relative to the femicide victims aged 18-54 group, femicide victims in the older age category were significantly more likely to:

- Be widowed
- Be Caucasian
- Have at least one child
- Be retired/out of labour force

Several of the above findings are expected given the age stages of the femicide victims. Specifically, it is reasonable to presume that, in comparison to the younger group, older femicide victims would be widowed, have at least one child, and be retired. In contrast, victims aged 55 years and older were less likely to:

- Have a prior criminal record
- Be under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- Have a history of substance abuse
- Have a documented history of previous suicide attempts

These findings are difficult to explain given that older women would arguably have more time and more opportunities to accumulate a criminal record. However, it may be that these dissimilarities are due to generational differences between older and younger women, an examination that is beyond the scope of this paper.

Turning to perpetrator characteristics (see Table 2), compared to femicide perpetrators who killed women aged 18 to 54, femicide perpetrators who killed women 55 years and older were significantly more likely to:

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- Be female
- Be in a current marital relationship
- Be out of the labour force/retired
- Have a history of psychiatric treatment/hospitalization
- Commit suicide following the incident

In contrast, femicide perpetrators who killed women 55 years and older were less likely to:

- Have a prior criminal record

Femicide perpetrators, regardless of the age group of the victim, did not differ significantly in terms of whether they had a child, their race/ethnicity, and whether they used or abused substances.[2]

Case characteristics

Several significant differences emerged with respect to case characteristics. Specifically, femicide cases involving victims 55 years and older were significantly more likely to involve other family members as perpetrators (i.e. siblings, parents, or other kin) whereas the younger age group were more likely to be perpetrated by intimate partners. The younger age group were also significantly more likely to have evidence of prior violence, threats, and police contact (see Table 3).

Additionally, the two femicide age groups differed in the method of killing: the older group were significantly more likely to be beaten to death whereas the younger group were more likely to be stabbed or shot to death. This finding aligns with observations of family violence against seniors more generally: a weapon is rarely used in cases of family violence perpetrated against seniors and, when one is used, very rarely is it a firearm.[vi] Perpetrators of femicide involving younger victims were significantly more likely to have been motivated by jealousy or feelings of being spurned whereas, according to official records, the older group of homicide cases appeared to have been motivated by the mental illness or diminished capacities of those involved. Prior research has recognized that intimate femicide is often motivated by jealousy whereas intimate femicide that is followed by the perpetrator's suicide is more often motivated by sickness, failing health, and other life stresses, which may explain the differing motives found across these two groups.[vii]

Criminal justice response

Finally, it was demonstrated that the two femicide groups differed significantly in the criminal justice response (see Table 4). First, perpetrators who killed women 55 years and older were significantly less likely to have a criminal charge laid against them whereas perpetrators who killed women in the younger age group were more likely to be charged with first degree murder. Second, among perpetrators who were prosecuted, those who committed femicide against the older age group were more likely to be found not criminally responsible, whereas perpetrators who committed femicide against the younger age group were more likely to be convicted of first- or second-degree murder. Third, restricting the analysis to include only perpetrators who were charged and prosecuted criminally, perpetrators who committed femicide against the older age category were more likely to be hospitalized which aligns with the finding that this group was more likely to be found not criminally responsible. In contrast, perpetrators who committed femicide against the younger group were more likely to receive a

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[2] Race/ethnicity and substance use had high proportions of missing information; findings based on cases with information.

prison sentence. When the analysis is restricted further to those perpetrators who received a term of imprisonment, those who committed femicide against the younger age category received a longer sentence, by approximately one year.

Conclusion

After reviewing the victim, perpetrator, case, and criminal justice characteristics for femicide cases involving victims 55 years and older, the findings allow for some tentative conclusions regarding the unique vulnerabilities of older women and the potential for intervention strategies. Specifically, older women are more likely to be widowed and retired which may increase isolation from support services and increase their likelihood of victimization due to the lack of a capable guardian. Intervention strategies can materialize in the form of increased education, screening caregivers, and instituting a mandatory reporting system of violence perpetrated against older women.[viii] For example, public education should revolve around educating individuals on the prevalence of violence perpetrated against older women, the unique vulnerabilities faced by an aging population, and the importance of support services available to older women facing abuse. Furthermore, screening caregivers may serve to identify individuals who have mental health and substance abuse issues – two factors revealed to be prominent characteristics of individuals who perpetrate femicide against older women. Finally, instituting a mandatory reporting system of violence against older women would provide a tool to identify at risk relationships and potentially intervene in those relationships to prevent future victimization.

Table 1. Descriptive and Bivariate Statistics of Victim Characteristics for Femicide Cases Involving Victims 55 and Older and Femicide Cases Involving Victims aged 18 to 54 (N = 2,134)

Variable	Total Sample (N = 2,134)	55+ Group (N = 452)	18-54 Group (N = 1,682)
Victim marital status***			
Unmarried/Never married	15%	4%	18%
Marital relationship	56%	60%	55%
Widowed	6%	25%	2%
Estranged marital relationship	22%	11%	25%
Victim's children***			
None	20%	8%	23%
At least one child	80%	92%	77%
Victim's race***			
White/European	69%	81%	67%
Aboriginal	9%	5%	10%
Black	9%	6%	10%
Other	13%	8%	14%
Victim's employment status***			
Unemployed	15%	4%	18%
Legally employed	55%	24%	63%
Out of labour force	22%	67%	11%
Welfare/disability	3%	4%	3%
Student	5%	1%	6%
Victim's psychiatric history			
None	69%	63%	71%
Treatment/hospitalization	25%	29%	24%
Other: evidence of mental illness	6%	9%	5%
Victim's prior criminal record***			
None	85%	98%	82%
Nonviolent record	12%	2%	15%
Violent record	3%	-	3%
Charges pending	1%	-	1%
Victim's substance use***			
None	66%	83%	62%
Alcohol use	26%	14%	28%
Drug use	6%	2%	7%
Both alcohol and drug use	3%	1%	4%
Victim's substance abuse history**			
No history	63%	78%	59%
History of substance abuse	37%	22%	41%
Victim's past suicide attempts*			
No known suicide attempts	91%	97%	90%
Suicide attempts in past	9%	3%	10%

[a] Percentages shown are based on cases where information was available
[b] Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding error

* indicates significant difference between groups at p < .05
** indicates significant difference between groups at p < .01
*** indicates significant difference between groups at p < .001

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Table 2. Descriptive and Bivariate Statistics of Perpetrator Characteristics for Femicide Cases Involving Victims Older than 55 years and Femicide Cases Involving Victims aged 18 to 54 (N = 1,934)

Variable	Total Sample (N = 1,934)	55+ Group (N = 405)	18-54 Group (N = 1,529)
Perpetrator gender			
Male	96%	93%	97%
Female	4%	7%	3%
Perpetrator marital status			
Unmarried/Never married	21%	29%	19%
Marital relationship	54%	61%	53%
Widowed	1%	1%	1%
Estranged marital relationship	24%	8%	28%
Perpetrator's children			
None	26%	25%	27%
At least one child	74%	75%	73%
Perpetrator's race			
White/European	67%	72%	65%
Aboriginal	7%	6%	8%
Black	12%	9%	12%
Other	15%	13%	15%
Perpetrator's employment status			
Unemployed	27%	27%	27%
Legally employed	57%	28%	63%
Out of labour force	8%	36%	2%
Welfare/disability	4%	6%	4%
Student	4%	4%	4%
Perpetrator's psychiatric history*			
None	28%	18%	33%
Treatment/hospitalization	57%	67%	53%
Other: evidence of mental illness	15%	16%	14%
Perpetrator's prior criminal record			
None	38%	53%	35%
Nonviolent record	25%	21%	25%
Violent record	35%	26%	37%
Charges pending	1%	1%	1%
Youth record	2%	1%	2%
Perpetrator substance use			
None	47%	54%	45%
Alcohol	41%	37%	41%
Drugs	5%	2%	6%
Both drugs/alcohol	8%	7%	8%
Perpetrator substance abuse history			
No history	32%	34%	31%
History of abuse	68%	66%	69%
Perpetrator suicide*			
No suicide	73%	68%	75%
Suicide	20%	26%	18%
Attempted suicide	7%	6%	7%

[a] Percentages shown are based on cases where information was available
[b] Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding error

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** p < .01
** p < .001

Table 3. Descriptive and Bivariate Statistics of Case Characteristics for Femicide Cases Involving Victims Older than 55 years and Femicide Cases Involving Victims aged 18 to 54 (N = 1,934)

Variable	Total Sample (N = 1,934)	55+ Group (N = 405)	18-54 Group (N = 1,529)
*Victim perpetrator relationship***			
Intimate partner	61%	38%	67%
Other family	12%	25%	8%
Friend/Acquaintance	15%	23%	13%
Stranger	10%	12%	10%
Other	2%	2%	2%
*Prior violence***			
No evidence	31%	51%	27%
Evidence of prior violence by perpetrator	69%	49%	73%
*Prior threats***			
No evidence of threats	51%	68%	47%
Victim claimed perpetrator threatened her	43%	28%	47%
Others heard perpetrator threaten victim	6%	4%	6%
*Prior contact with police***			
No known prior contact	57%	73%	54%
Police intervened in past	43%	27%	47%
*Method of killing***			
Stabbing	29%	23%	30%
Shooting	27%	25%	27%
Beating	19%	29%	17%
Strangulation/Suffocation	17%	14%	18%
Other	8%	9%	8%
Excessive force			
No evidence	63%	62%	63%
Multiple/repeated methods	37%	38%	37%
Weapon			
No weapon	23%	21%	23%
Gun	24%	23%	25%
Knife/other sharp object	37%	33%	38%
Other	16%	24%	14%
*Motive***			
Unknown	19%	19%	18%
Jealousy/spurned	27%	8%	32%
Quarrel	16%	13%	16%
Financially motivated	5%	7%	5%
Mental illness	11%	29%	7%
Other	22%	24%	21%

[a] Percentages shown are based on cases where information was available

[b] Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding error

*** p < .001

Table 4. Descriptive and Bivariate Statistics of the Criminal Justice Response for Femicide Cases Involving Victims Older than 55 years and Femicide Cases Involving Victims aged 18 to 54 (N = 1,934)

Variable	Total Sample (N = 1,934)	55+ Group (N = 405)	18-54 Group (N = 1,529)
*Charge laid****			
Manslaughter	3%	3%	3%
Murder	2%	1%	2%
First degree murder	40%	30%	43%
Second degree murder	32%	33%	32%
Other	1%	2%	1%
None, decided not to prosecute	1%	4%	1%
NA, died before charge laid	21%	27%	19%
*Conviction****	(N = 1,413)	(N = 250)	(N = 1,163)
Manslaughter	24%	22%	25%
Murder	1%	1%	1%
First degree murder	17%	9%	19%
Second degree murder	37%	28%	38%
Other	3%	4%	3%
NCR	11%	25%	9%
Not prosecuted	4%	6%	4%
Not guilty	4%	6%	3%
*Sentence length***	*13.69 years*	*12.16 years*	*13.93 years*

[a] Percentages shown are based on cases where information was available

[b] Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding error

** p < .01

*** p < .001

[i] Statistics Canada. 2016. "Family violence in Canada: A statistical profile, 2014." *Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics.* Catalogue no. 85-002-X. http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2016001/article/14303-eng.pdf

[ii] Statistics Canada. 2016.

[iii] Dawson, M. 2016. Punishing femicide: Criminal justice responses to the killing of women over four decades. *Current Sociology* 64(7): 996-1016.

[iv] Canetto, S.S., & Hollenshead, J.D. 2001. "Older women and mercy killing". *OMEGA, 42* (1), 83-99.

[v] Crime and Misconduct Commission. 2013. "Vulnerable victims: Homicide of older people". *Research and Issues, 12.* www.ccc.qld.gov.au/.../vulnerable-victims-homicide-of-older-people.pdf

[vi] Statistics Canada. 2016.

[vii] Dawson, M. 2005. "Intimate femicide followed by suicide: examining the role of premeditation". *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior, 35* (1), 76-90.

[viii] Crime and Misconduct Commission. 2013.

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