

# Gender Differences in Patterns and Trends in U.S. Homicide, 1976–2015

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## Abstract

In the research literature on homicide, gender has generally received less attention than other demographic characteristics, specifically the age and race of victims and offenders. To some extent, this is understandable because the overwhelming majority, almost three-quarters, of homicides in the United States involve a male killing another male. Therefore, the usual patterns of homicide mirror for the most part the patterns of male homicide. However, there are substantial differences in the trends and patterns of female offending and victimization that should not be ignored in the aggregate. In this article, we employ a national homicide database (the FBI's Supplementary Homicide Reports, SHR) from 1976 through 2015 with multiple imputation of missing information to examine gender differences among victims and offenders in terms of characteristics such as age, race, weapon, circumstances, and victim–offender relationship.

**Keywords:** homicide, gender, intimate partner homicide

**N**OTWITHSTANDING the usual preference for gender-neutral language, the Latin root of the word “homicide” is somewhat fitting as the study of murder is essentially the study of men who kill or who are killed. As Steffensmeier and Allan (1996, pp. 459) note concerning the nearly universal gender gap, “Women are always and everywhere less likely than men to commit criminal acts,” a phenomenon most evident in the extreme case of murder. Yet besides overall gender differences in homicide risk and homicidal propensity, offense characteristics such as method, motive, location, and victim–offender relationship also vary between men and women (Dobash et al. 1992). With but a few exceptions (e.g., Violence Policy Center 2016), homicide research remains largely male centric, with patterns unique to female offenders and victims often lost in the aggregate. Although males constitute the overwhelming majority of both homicide offenders and victims, it is important nonetheless to identify gender differences and similarities in trends and patterns of homicide.

## Research on Homicide and Gender

Although criminologists have not ignored women as offenders, female criminality has often been given secondary attention or considered to be of a special nature. More than a century ago, for example, Cesare Lombroso, widely regarded as the “father of criminology,” characterized the female offender as possessing a latent “fund of immorali-

ty,” reflected in crimes such as prostitution and lasciviousness (Lombroso and Ferrero 1898, p. 216).

Wolfgang (1958), in his classic study of homicide patterns in Philadelphia, emphasized the need to disaggregate homicide data by gender, demonstrating that women are involved as the perpetrator of victim-precipitated homicides twice as often as in other murderous situations. In addition, he reported that women and men were equally represented as offenders and victims in intimate partner homicides. With few exceptions, however, the majority of early homicide research failed to examine the role of gender, thus obscuring the differences in offending and victimization between men and women (Dobash and Dobash 2017).

A large body of research has focused on the wide variety of situations, settings, and precipitants for offenders, overwhelmingly males, who commit murder, including sexual homicide, profit-motivated murder, and thrill killing. Recent work on female offending and victimization (so-called femicide) has centered instead on intimate partner violence, infanticide, and sexual victimization (Seal 2010). In many of these cases, the female offender is viewed as less culpable, with her crimes often being blamed on the influence of a male accomplice, hormonal imbalances (such as premenstrual syndrome or postpartum depression), hysteria or other mental illnesses, or seen as a response to victimization (Fox et al. 2012; Pearson 1998). According to Steffensmeier and Allan (1996, pp. 480), “For women to kill, they generally must see their situation as life-threatening, as

affecting the physical or emotional well-being of themselves or their children.” Overall, it is often noted that males and females tend to see the utility of violence in radically different ways. Whereas men tend to employ violence as an offensive move to establish superiority, women typically view violence as a defense of last resort.

Although violent women may benefit from the stereotype of mitigated responsibility, feminist criminologists suggest that women may actually be punished doubly for their offenses—once for breaking the law and once for violating gender norms (Nagel and Hagan 1983; Seal 2010). Much of the homicide literature focusing on women is, therefore, related to the social construction of gender and violence. However, regardless of whether women are judged too leniently or too harshly, scholars generally agree that their overall offending and victimization patterns substantially diverge from those of their male counterparts, warranting a close examination of gender differences.

In this article, we focus specifically on those differences—the trends and patterns of homicide offending and victimization for men and women separately. A number of scholars have attempted to draw conclusions about gender differences in homicide based on relatively small samples (e.g., Jurik and Winn 1990) or data sets specific to a single jurisdiction (e.g., Block and Christakos 1995). In this article, however, we explore the role of gender along with other demographic and situational correlates of homicide using a large-scale database on victims and offenders that is national in scope and spans a fairly lengthy time frame.

### Data and Methods

For the purpose of examining gender differences in patterns and trends among homicide victims and offenders, we used a national database of murders and non-negligent manslaughters spanning the years 1976 through 2015, derived from the FBI’s Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR). As part of its Uniform Crime Reporting Program, the FBI receives incident-based reports from state and local law enforcement agencies containing a range of information about each homicide and all victims and offenders involved. Specifically, the SHR includes details on the jurisdiction in which the incident occurred, victim and offender demographics, victim–offender relationship, weapon used, and circumstances of the crime.

Although the SHR represents the best source of national data on victims and offenders, it is not without its limitations. By far the most problematic issue surrounds the substantial amount of missing data. Unit missingness arises when agencies fail to report some or all of their homicide incidents to the FBI. Item missingness, however, arises when data records for submitted cases are incomplete, lacking certain details on victim(s) or offender(s), most often resulting from the fact that the crime had not been solved.

Judging from estimates generated by the FBI, SHR records are unavailable for almost 8% of the nation’s homicides (unit missingness). Moreover, for the existing SHR records, about one-third are missing at least some information about the victim, offender, or nature of the offense (item missingness). Without taking steps to overcome these gaps, attempts to analyze the data will not only undercount homicide prevalence but will also likely reflect a nonrep-

resentative subset of the population. For example, studies of intimate partner homicide based only on cases identified as such understate the extent of the problem (e.g., Greenfeld et al. 1998), whereas studies that distribute unsolved cases to intimate partner homicide in proportion to solved cases overstate the prevalence of homicide involving intimate partners (e.g., Catalano et al. 2009). More generally, analyses of offender characteristics are similarly biased by uneven clearance rates based on victim age, sex, and race.

To overcome these obstacles, we used a two-stage approach for filling in the gaps. First, we imputed missing data found in incomplete records and, second, we adjusted existing records to account for the share of homicides for which no data exist. When information is missing about an offender’s age, sex, race, and relationship to the victim, one can make reasonable estimates based on whatever is known about the victim and the location. For example, if a black male teenager is fatally shot in a large city by an unknown assailant, it is far more probable that the perpetrator was also a young black male rather than, say, an elderly white female. Of course, one cannot know for sure that the perpetrator has those more likely attributes, and any attempt to replace missing data with estimates, no matter how reasonable, would improperly treat the replacement values as if they were real when the data are analyzed. However, we used multiple imputation to generate several estimates based on a stochastic (probabilistic) process and data elements that are known about the incident to ensure that a set of multiple replacements properly reflects the extent of uncertainty.

Next, we used a weighting procedure to have the available records serve as proxies for the missing reports. Specifically, we matched the age, sex, and race distribution of the victims within the SHR data to that found in the more complete mortality records of homicide victims from the National Center for Health Statistics, and then weighted the SHR cases so that the total conformed to FBI’s published estimates of the number of homicides in the United States for any given year.

TABLE 1. OFFENDER–VICTIM COMBINATIONS BY HOMICIDE TYPE, 2000–2015

	<i>Sex of offender and victim</i>				<i>Total (%)</i>
	<i>M kills M (%)</i>	<i>M kills F (%)</i>	<i>F kills M (%)</i>	<i>F kills F (%)</i>	
All homicides	72.6	18.3	7.1	2.1	100
Victim–offender relationship					
Intimate	9.3	67.4	19.4	3.9	100
Family	55.5	24.5	12.4	7.6	100
Acquaintance	83.9	9.9	5.0	1.2	100
Stranger	88.3	8.1	3.1	0.4	100
Weapon					
Gun	80.0	13.7	5.4	0.9	100
Knife	61.0	24.1	11.9	3.1	100
Other	54.9	30.0	9.7	5.5	100
Circumstances					
Felony	79.5	14.1	5.2	1.2	100
Argument	69.4	20.7	8.1	1.9	100
Other	70.3	18.9	7.6	3.1	100

F, female; M, male.

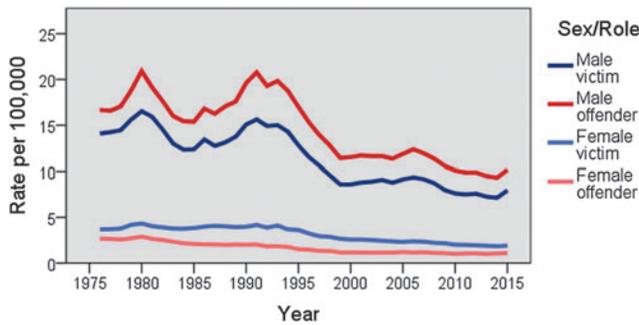


FIG. 1. Offending and victimization rates by sex, 1976–2015.

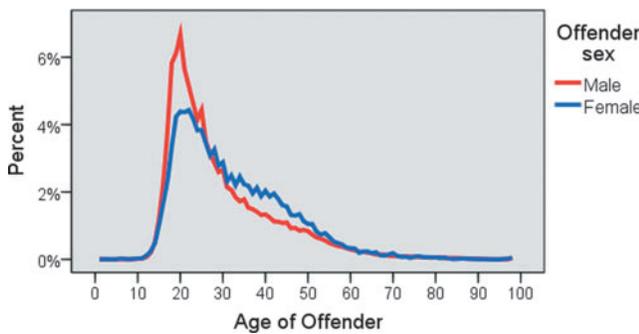


FIG. 2. Offender age distribution by sex, 2000–2015.

In the analyses of trends in homicide counts and rates to follow, we used the entire range of years for which the SHR is available in its current form, from 1976 through 2015. However, when examining patterns not conditioned by time trend, we used only cases that occurred since 2000 to give a relatively current perspective of the role of gender in homicide victimization and offending.

**Results**

Although the killing of women, or “femicide,” tends to receive intense media coverage (Pritchard and Hughes 1997), males are far more likely to be both perpetrators and victims of homicide. For the past four decades, nearly three-

fourths of all homicides have exclusively involved men. About 90% of all perpetrators are male, and about 81% of their victims are male. Moreover, 78% of the victims of female offenders are also male. Stated in terms of rates per 100,000 population, males commit murder about 10 times as often as females, and are victims nearly four times as often. The gender combination seen in homicide overall varies considerably based on weapon, circumstances, and the relationship between victim and offender. As shown in Table 1, the percentage of murders in which the offender and victim both are male increases from 73% overall to 80% for gun homicides and for felony murders, and is as high as 84% and 88% when the victim is an acquaintance or a stranger, respectively. In contrast, the gender ratio tends to even out somewhat among infanticides, intimate partner homicides (i.e., spouses, ex-spouses, and boyfriends/girlfriends), and family murders.

Consistent with the overall predominance of males on both sides of the murder equation, the patterns of male offending and victimization rates parallel overall homicide trends in the United States for the past 40 years (Fig. 1). In contrast, homicides involving females have been much more stable over time, exhibiting a general decline with relatively minor fluctuations since the late 1970s. In addition to differences in these trends, the relative likelihood of killing or being killed is reversed between the sexes, such that women have a higher rate of victimization than offending, whereas men have a higher rate of offending than victimization.

*Demographic differences*

Not only are women underrepresented among both assailants and victims of homicide, there are some noteworthy gender differences in terms of age and race. Figure 2 displays the offender age distribution by sex for the years 2000–2015 combined, revealing a distinct early 20s peak for both males and females. However, the abundance of young adults among female killers is not as pronounced, with a greater percentage of women committing murder during middle age than men. Although nearly half of all male killers are younger than 25, only 35% of female murderers are in that same age category (Table 2).

Besides differences in the age distributions among male and female offenders, there are sharp differences in trends

TABLE 2. PERCENTAGE OF MALE/FEMALE VICTIMS, OFFENDERS, AND POPULATION BY AGE AND RACE, 2000–2015

	Male			Female		
	Victims (%)	Offenders (%)	Population (%)	Victims (%)	Offenders (%)	Population (%)
<b>Age</b>						
Less than 14	3.9		19.5	10.9		18.0
14–17	5.0	8.5	5.8	3.6	6.2	5.4
18–24	27.6	39.7	10.3	15.2	29.1	9.5
25+	63.5	51.8	64.4	70.4	64.7	67.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>Race</b>						
White	44.1	42.3	80.5	62.0	51.9	79.5
Black	52.7	54.5	13.1	33.6	44.1	13.9
Other	3.2	3.2	6.4	4.3	4.0	6.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

The percentage of offenders less than 14 is virtually 0.

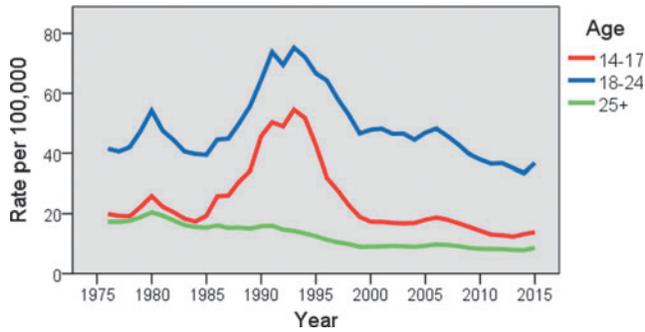


FIG. 3. Male homicide offending rate by age, 1976–2015.

since the mid-1970s in the rate of homicide by age between the sexes. As shown in Figure 3, murders committed by adolescent and young adult males peaked in the late 1980s and early 1990s, reflecting a surge in gang conflict and competition over drug markets (Blumstein 1995). This spike in murder committed by young males prompted the controversial notion of the “superpredator” (DiIulio 1995). However, as reflected in Figure 4, this was largely a single-sex phenomenon as there was only a modest rise in murders perpetrated by young women.

Regardless of gender, victim age tends to correspond closely to offender age. Female victims, however, are disproportionately children, middle-aged, or older adults in comparison with males (Table 2). For example, about 11% of murdered women are less than 14 years-old, with 70% more than the age of 25 years. Both of the corresponding percentages are lower for male victims, however, because of the large share of 18–24-year-olds (28%) among male victims. Overall, the trends in offending and victimization relative to age among males and females are similar, yet the magnitude of these differences is quite dissimilar.

The role of race in terms of gender differences is even greater than that of age. Blacks are substantially overrepresented among homicide offenders and victims for both sexes, but to a far lesser extent among females (Table 2). Specifically, whereas blacks represent only 13% of the male population, they account for more than half of all male murder victims and perpetrators. While representing the same proportion of the female population, blacks account for one-third of murdered women and about 45% of female killers. Therefore, although blacks involved in homicide incidents vastly exceed their relative share of the population,

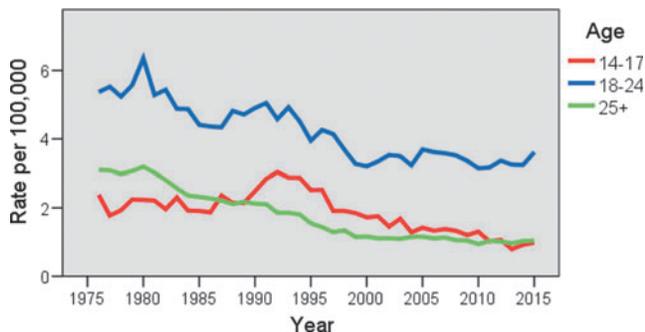


FIG. 4. Female homicide offending rate by age, 1976–2015.

TABLE 3. INCIDENT CHARACTERISTICS BY VICTIM AND OFFENDER SEX, 2000–2015

	Victim sex		Offender sex	
	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
<b>Weapon</b>				
Gun	72.3	48.5	69.5	46.9
Knife	11.5	16.7	11.4	19.5
Other	16.2	34.8	19.1	33.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>Circumstances</b>				
Felony	29.3	20.8	29.9	21.6
Argument	40.4	45.8	39.9	43.2
Other	30.3	33.4	30.2	35.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>Victim–offender relationship</b>				
Intimate	5.0	44.1	9.9	28.9
Family	10.2	18.3	9.4	23.2
Acquaintance	54.4	26.7	50.7	35.7
Stranger	30.4	10.9	30.0	12.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>Victim count</b>				
Single	91.3	85.1	94.4	95.4
Multiple	8.7	14.9	5.6	4.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>Offender count</b>				
Single	84.4	91.6	72.3	67.6
Multiple	15.6	8.4	27.7	32.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

the race differences in homicide are more pronounced among males than among females.

*Weapon and circumstances*

Some of the largest gender differences are related to the weapon used to commit murder. Whereas both sexes employ firearms most often because of their accuracy and lethality, men tend to rely on guns more so than women. As shown in Table 3, nearly three-quarters of male offenders and nearly half of their female counterparts kill their victims with a firearm. Women often prefer more distant and cleaner means of committing murder. In fact, women are responsible for nearly 40% of homicides involving poison, drugs, drowning, and asphyxiation. Drowning and asphyxiations

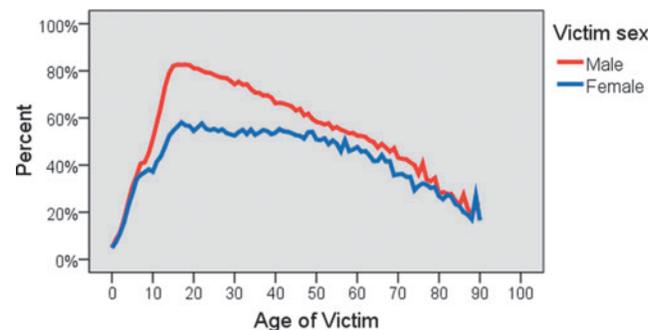


FIG. 5. Percentage gun homicide by victim age, 2000–2015.

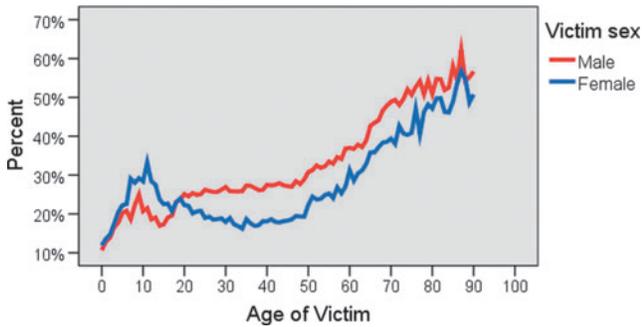


FIG. 6. Percentage felony homicide by victim age, 2000–2015.

by women are especially prevalent in homicides of children. Two-thirds of infanticides (victims less than age 5) are committed by women (primarily mothers or step-mothers), and 80% of homicides of victims less than the age of 1 year implicate a female perpetrator.

Gun victimization varies by age for men and women alike (Fig. 5). The percentages of male and female victims who are shot to death increase sharply from childhood through adolescence, peaking at more than 80% for males and 60% for females, before gradually declining with increasing age.

In terms of the circumstances underlying the assault, men have a greater proportionate involvement in felony murder than do women. As shown in Table 3, nearly 30% of male offenders and victims are involved in a felony-related incident compared with about 20% for females. However, the share of felony-murder victimization tends to increase over the life course for both men and women (Fig. 6). Older adults are especially vulnerable to assaults and robberies because their injuries are more likely to prove fatal than those of their younger counterparts.

Finally, as also shown in Table 3, there are some noteworthy gender differences in multiple-victim and multiple-offender homicides. Women as victims are nearly twice as likely to be murdered in a multiple-victim incident, many of which involve a domestic homicide of a woman and her children at the hands of a husband/father. The reverse is true for multiple-offender homicides, wherein men are nearly twice as likely to be killed in situations such as gang warfare and violence associated with drug trafficking. In terms of offending, there is only a marginal difference in the involvement of men and women in partner or team killings.

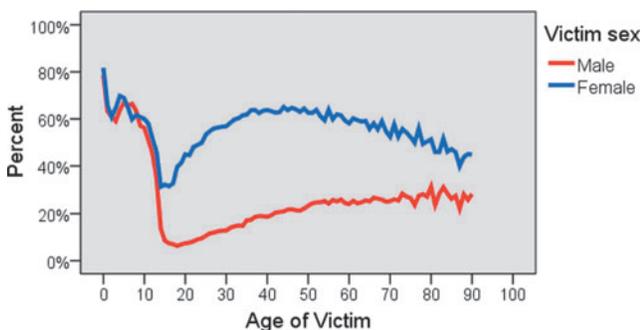


FIG. 7. Percentage intimate/family homicide by victim age, 2000–2015.

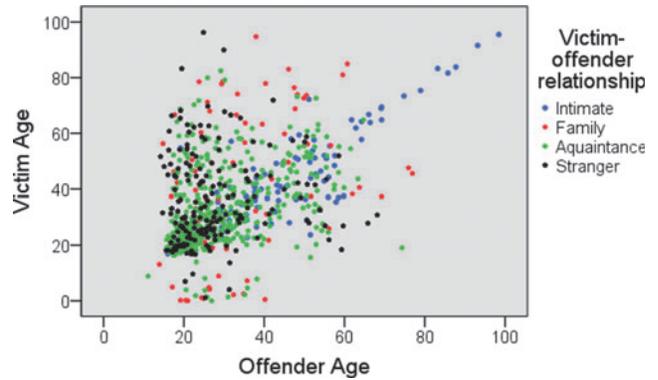


FIG. 8. Victim/offender age combination by relationship for male offenders (sample of 2015 homicides).

Women often are involved in killings as a subordinate accomplice of their husbands or boyfriends.

*Victim–offender relationship*

Despite the sizable overrepresentation of males among homicide victims and especially offenders, the gender gap narrows substantially when the perpetrator and victim have a close relationship. Although the vast majority of homicides committed by men (81%) involve an acquaintance or stranger as victim, more than half of female perpetrators kill intimate partners or family members (Table 3). In terms of victimization, 30% of males but only 11% of females are killed by a stranger. Victim age interacts with gender in the prevalence of murders committed by intimate partners or family members. For child victims, the percentage killed by a family member is virtually identical for boys and girls and declines from 80% down to about 40% into early adolescence. From that age forward, murders committed by intimate partners begin to occur with the proportion of women being killed by someone close to them greatly outnumbering that of men (Fig. 7).

When offender age is considered in conjunction with victim age, differences in victim–offender relationship by gender are even more pronounced. Figures 8 and 9 show scatterplots of victim and offender age for samples of 2015 homicides while controlling for victim–offender relationship

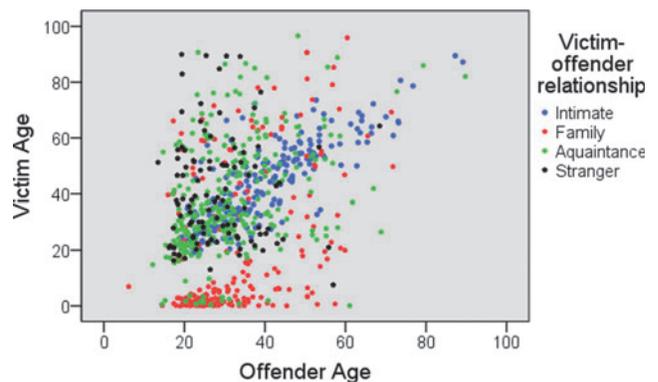


FIG. 9. Victim/offender age combination by relationship for female offenders (sample of 2015 homicides).

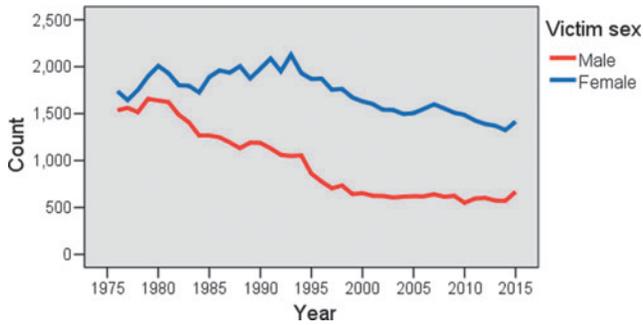


FIG. 10. Intimate partner homicide by victim sex, 1976–2015.

for male and female offenders, respectively. For both sexes, intimate partner homicides (shown in blue) tend, as expected, to involve individuals of similar age. The similarity in victim and offender age generally holds for other types of murders committed by males, whereas there is greater age disparity in homicides perpetrated by women. Shown in red, females are often implicated in homicides of children, be it their own son or daughter or some other family relation.

Referencing the fact that female killers often target their husbands (or ex-husbands), some scholars have argued that the prevalence of homicide and nonlethal violence involving spouses is fairly equal across gender (Maxfield 1989; Steinmetz and Lucca 1988; Straus and Gelles 1986, 1990). The role of deadly weapons, especially firearms, has been cited as a possible explanation for this supposed phenomenon, as they reduce gender differences in physical strength (McNeely and Robinson-Simpson 1987; Steinmetz and Lucca 1988). However, these claims are not supported by recent data (see also Dobash et al. 1992). More than two-thirds of intimate partner homicides involve a male perpetrator and a female victim, in comparison with the one-fifth of incidents in which the genders are reversed (Table 1). Moreover, nearly half of all female homicide victims are killed by an intimate partner, whereas only 5% of male homicide victims experience the same fate (Table 3).

It is likely that the conflicting results from earlier studies and more current research reflect shifts in homicide patterns over time. Figure 10 shows intimate partner victimization trends by gender for the past 40 years. Although the prevalence of intimate partner homicide in the late 1970s was similar for men and women, the number of male victims has

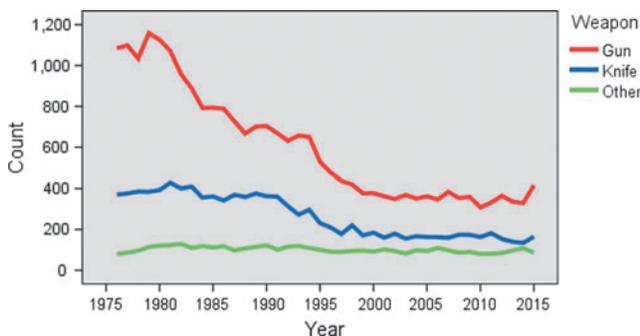


FIG. 11. Intimate partner homicide of males by weapon, 1976–2015.

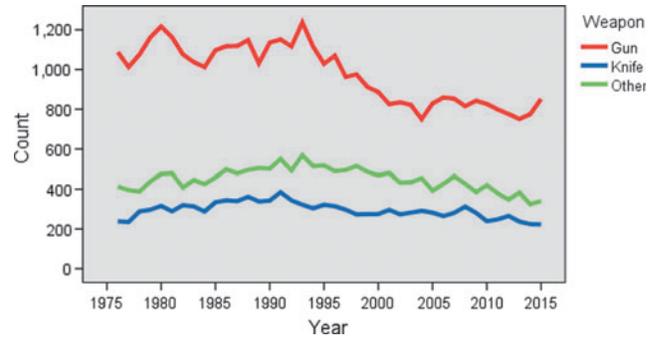


FIG. 12. Intimate partner homicide of females by weapon, 1976–2015.

steadily declined ever since. The drop in male victims is especially pronounced in murders involving a firearm (Fig. 11). In contrast, female intimate partner homicides actually increased up until the early 1990s before experiencing a far modest decline. This pattern in female victimization appears to hold regardless of weapon (Fig. 12).

### Discussion and Conclusion

According to Dobash and Dobash (2017, p. 131), “Unless the murders of women are examined separately from the murders of men, that is, disaggregated by gender, little can be known about this type of murder which is otherwise lost within the larger number of male–male homicides.” The same holds true for women and men as perpetrators. Indeed, our analysis of national homicide data for a four decade time frame uncovered a number of significant gender differences in the prevalence and correlates of victimization and offending.

Among all the results already reported, perhaps the most striking and important surrounds the trends in intimate partner homicide, particularly in the context of ongoing efforts to curtail domestic violence. Some researchers argue that the reduction in male intimate partner victimization, a decline of nearly 60% over the past four decades, is because of an increase in the availability of social and legal interventions, liberalized divorce laws, greater economic independence of women, as well as a reduction in the stigma of being the victim of domestic violence. Although at an earlier time a woman may have felt compelled to kill her abusive spouse as her only defense, she now has more opportunities to escape the relationship through means such as protective orders and shelters (Dugan et al. 1999; Fox et al. 2012).

As a tragic irony, the wider availability of support services for abused women did not appear to have quite the intended effect, at least through the 1980s, as only male victimization declined. However, the eventual passage of the Brady Handgun Prevention Act in 1993 (Pub.L. 103–159, 107 Stat. 1536) disqualified those who had had a conviction for misdemeanor domestic assault from purchasing a gun legally. Although it can only be speculated, the Brady Act, among other factors (e.g., mass incarceration of men), may indeed have helped to reduce the victimization of women by an intimate partner.

Despite the size of the database used here as well as the length of years covered, the range of variables available in

the SHR is limited to demographic measures and a few incident characteristics. As the National Incident-Based Reporting System continues to expand, especially so as to include large urban areas where lethal violence is more prevalent, the study of national homicide patterns can be expanded to elements such as location, time of day, and day of week. That should advance our understanding of gender differences in homicide, potentially leading to improved prevention efforts.

#### Author Disclosure Statement

No competing financial interests exist.

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