

My News, My Views

Mom and Apple Pie or Black Widow: An Examination of Female Violence

By Kathryn Seifert, Ph.D.

In the animal kingdom, females are much more aggressive than males in situations involving survival and protecting their young. Yet it is difficult for us as a society to believe that our human mothers, sisters, or daughters can be violent against family members.

Female violence may have been more of a hidden problem in the past. Women have tended to be violent in private rather than public. Male victims of spousal abuse have been reluctant to report to the police that they are abused by women. After all, a black eye from the wife would do little for a man's traditionally macho image. Female abuse of children may be seen by agencies and courts as accidental more often than it has been for male violence toward children. Female violence has been more readily seen as the product of earlier abuse of females than it has been for males. But as the media focuses on extreme cases such as those of Susan Smith and Andrea Yates, and contemporary film portrays serial killer Aileen Wuornos, it is clear that violent women have surfaced into the national consciousness. Our perceptions of women and their ability to be violent are changing, and women may be becoming more violent.

It has been suggested by previous studies that female aggression is less severe, less common, and more often verbal than physical when compared to male aggression. However, there have been more recent studies that have found that female interpersonal violence within the home is as severe and as frequent as male violence (Feibert, 1997). Additionally, female violence appears to be on the rise while male violence seems to have leveled off or be decreasing. Some women and girls are injuring or killing their children, partners, or parents, and some are joining violent gangs. Female aggression is more accepted by society than in previous generations and so it is also on the rise and more open.

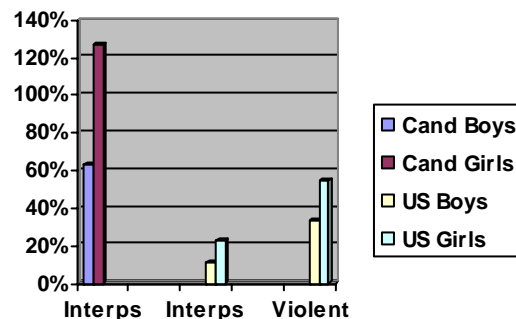
A Yale study in 1963 found that women were

more likely to administer high-voltage shock to a screaming victim than males were (Denfeld, 1997). Tarvis (1993) found that women resort to aggression as often as men when they are angry. Denfeld (1997) reported that women show their violence in private, while men are more likely to be violent in public, giving society the impression that women are less violent than men.

Adolescent Female Violence

The number of violent males is generally twice that of violently acting out female teens in Canada (Cunningham, 2000). However, Canadian National statistics (Statistics Canada; Savoie, 1999) indicate an increase in adolescent female interpersonal crimes from 1988 to 1998 of 127 percent, twice the rate of increase for males. In the US, from 1989 to 1993, juvenile arrests of females rose 23 percent, twice the growth rate of boys (11 percent). In the same years, violent crime index offenses increased 55 percent for female teens and 33 percent for male teens (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. % increase in interpersonal crimes and violent crimes - Canada/US and Gender



Causation of female violence in the teen years may be similar to male aggression.

In the US, economic disadvantage and social disorganization was not associated with teen female homicide (Steffensmeier and Haynie, 2000).

Various studies have demonstrated the relationship between exposure to childhood violence and violence perpetration by teens. This is especially true for females. Adolescent females were more likely than males to experience violence at home, report trauma related symptoms, and have suicidal impulses. All dangerously violent teens had experienced significantly more

My News, My Views

Female Violence (con't)

trauma than their matched peers (Wester, 2001). Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham, & Saunders (2000) found that parental aggression, antisocial peers, behavioral and academic problems in school, depression and victimization were associated with teenaged female aggression. In one study, 70 percent of adolescent female delinquents had been sexually abused (Calhoun, Jurgens and Chen, 1993). This abuse may delay moral, social, and cognitive development. Females may also act aggressively toward themselves in the form of self-mutilation, drug abuse, starvation (anorexia, bulimia), and suicide attempts.

In the present study, the correlates of female teen aggression were examined. Eighty-eight percent of aggressive girls had psychiatric problems, 78 percent had average or better Q, 77 percent were paranoid and had anger control problems, 71 percent had poor problem solving skills, 70 percent have parents with untreated or ineffectively treated mental illness or substance abuse problems, 68 percent have severe behavior problems, 67 percent are impulsive, and 62 percent experience family violence. The characteristics that are most strongly related to young female aggression are moderate to severe behavior problems beginning before the age of 13, delinquency, more than three assaults, assault of an authority figure, impulsivity, antisocial attitudes, severe assaults, belief in the legitimacy of aggression as a means to an end, and a lack of remorse.

Pauline Parker and Juliet Hulme, two teenaged

girls who lived in New Zealand are examples of teenaged female murderers. Both girls had severe physical illnesses from early childhood with separation from their parents due to hospitalizations. Juliet was often depressed. Both girls were very intelligent and creative. However, they brutally murdered Pauline's mother (45 blows from a half brick in a stocking) because they saw her as standing in the way of their relationship.

They engaged in unreasonable amounts of fantasy and created an exceptionally close bond with one another by the elimination of contact with all other peers. Juliet's parents' relationship was on the verge of divorce, which meant that the girls



would possibly be separated. This immediately preceded the murder of Pauline's mother in an attempt by the girls to hinder their likelihood of being separated (Seamus McGraw, Court TV's Crime Library, 2005).

Adult Female Aggression

Female violence and aggression is increasing.

Steffensmeier and Haynie (2000) found that economic disadvantage and social disorganization was associated with adult female homicide. Campbell (1993) suggests that women express violence in response to stress and frustration. Katherine Ramsland has proposed several reasons for aggression by women (Court TV Crime Library, 2005). Some work in partnership with boyfriends or husbands who beat them if they do not cooperate, some are impulsively violent, and some are methodically cruel. Elizabeth Epstein (2005) found that among the relationships of 109 alcoholic women, 61 percent reported some violence. In 23 percent of the couples, the woman was more violent and in 11 percent of the couples, the man was more violent.

In his annotated bibliography, Feibert (1997) points out that many studies have found that women are equally or more violent in their interpersonal relationships than men. Dobash et al.,

My News, My Views

Female Violence (con't)

(1992) point out that female and male rates of spousal murder in the US are very similar, while the perpetrators of spousal abuse are predominantly male.

In the present study, the characteristics of adult females was examined in terms of any aggression, chronic aggression, and severe aggression. For adult females, certain characteristics were prevalent or significant across all three groups: any aggression, severe aggression (causes harm to another), and chronic aggression (more than three assaults), moderate to severe behavior problems that began before the age of 13, assault of an authority figure, impulsivity, delinquency, running away from home, substance abuse, believes in the legitimacy of aggression as a means to an end, very poor or very good superficial social skills (glib), attachment problems, few pro-social peers, behavior problems at school, home or work, not successful in school, job, or as a homemaker, family violence and low warmth in family of origin, lack of appropriate boundaries in family of origin or present family, and parent(s) had untreated or ineffectively treated psychiatric or substance abuse problems.

In addition to those traits, women with severe assaults that caused harm or death to another had escaped from a facility, run away from home, and bullying behavior. A third of those with chronic assaults lacked remorse and had positive attitudes toward antisocial behavior, emotional displays that were flat or out of control, deviant peers, and excessive absenteeism from school or work in addition to the general characteristics cited above. Additionally it appears that the number and the severity of traumas experienced by a woman are associated with the number and severity of behavior problems a woman commits.

Mothers Who Kill their Children

It is almost impossible for most of us to understand why a mother would kill her own child. However, it has been happening since time began. Four motives of filicide have been identified by research: mental illness of the mother often

with religious delusions; child abuse resulting in death; retaliation against someone else, often a spouse; and neonaticide, when the infant is killed within the first 24 hours of life by a young mother who is isolated, has not revealed her pregnancy, and has no support. A study at the University of South Carolina School of Medicine found that 80 percent of 20 women in South Carolina who had killed their children had a diagnosable mental illness or mental retardation, but only 20 percent were receiving services (Shea and McKee). Most were also experiencing considerable stress.

Females are responsible for 78 percent of abuse and neglect related homicides of children (Deltito, Joseph, NY Medical College). The rates of infanticide have remained fairly stable for two decades. From 1976 to 2002, 30 percent of children under the age of 5 who have been murdered were killed by their mothers (BJS).

Bradley and Peters (1991) cited hyper-reaction to misconduct of children as a factor in maternal child abuse, while Meier (1995) found that abusive mothers felt a sense of incompetence, loss of control over their lives, anguish and depression, isolation, anxiety, thought disorders, and an inability to cope with everyday tasks. Postpartum depression and psychosis has also been cited as a factor in the maternal murder of one's children.

Many mothers who abuse or kill their children may have been victims of childhood abuse or neglect or exposed to domestic violence. In the present study, 76 percent of aggressive adult females came from low warmth, high conflict families, 74 percent were exposed to family violence, and 76 percent had parents with significant mental health or substance abuse problems. There are few studies of women who kill their children. It is hypothesized that the death of a high percentage of children killed by mothers follow a pattern of prior abuse or neglect. The families are generally under a great deal of stress. Several have been identified as having postpartum depression or psychosis.

The FBI has a profile of mothers who kill their children (Pergament, 2006):

The FBI's profile described a woman in her twenties, who grew up or lived in poverty, was under-educated, had a history of either physical or sexual abuse or both, remained isolated from social

My News, My Views

Female Violence (con't)

supports, had depressive and suicidal tendencies and was usually experiencing rejection by a male lover at the time she murdered. The profile also described how the mother might also find herself enmeshed with her children and show an inability to define her boundaries as separate from her children. The profile also described how depression in the mother was often correlated with a blurring of boundaries.

A mother's biological ties, her strong role expectations to be a mother, her significantly greater care-giving responsibilities, her isolation in carrying out those responsibilities and her greater tendency toward depression and self-destruction were likely to result in her becoming trapped in enmeshment with her children. During a homicidal act, a mother may view a child as a mere extension of herself rather than as a separate being. A mother's suicidal inclination may often be transformed into filial homicide.

A study of murdered children by the Center for Missing and Exploited Children in the mid 1990's found that when mothers kill their children, they often place them in a womb-like wrapping and/or in water and that they are found less than 10 miles from home (Pergament, 2006).

Let's follow a few infamous tales. Many recognize the name Susan Smith, and the horrible story of how she allowed her Mazda to roll into the John D. Long Lake outside of Union South Carolina with Michael, age 3, and Alex, age 14 months,

strapped securely in the back seat. She was in the middle of a divorce and believed that the children stood in the way of her relationship with a new boyfriend. She claimed that she was also having suicidal thoughts. She was depressed and under significant stress, so she committed the unthinkable—she killed her children.

Smith's history included a father who was an alcoholic, violent, jealous, and who committed suicide when Smith was 8 years old. Smith's brother received treatment for a variety of issues and attempted suicide at age 13. Smith was described as unusual and sad as a child. After her mother remarried, she did very well in school and



helped the elderly as a volunteer. She craved her step-father's attention and was then molested by him. The family blamed Smith for her own abuse. No charges were ever pressed against her step-father, even though the abuse was ongoing and reported to the authorities at least twice. In 1988 Smith was dating two men simultaneously (one married, one not), became pregnant, and was rejected by the older married man. She

attempted suicide.

In 1991, again pregnant, she married David Smith, a nice but emotionally needy person. David's parents' relationship was conflicted due to his mother's (Linda's) insistence on isolation for religious reasons (she was a Jehovah's Witness). His father also attempted suicide. Smith and David's relationship was similarly conflicted. Once separated from David, she continued to be sexually involved with her step-father, David, and another man, Tom Findlay. When her divorce from David was filed, Tom sent her a Dear John letter. While Susan was working and attending college, she soon began to take days off from work to drink. She was anxious when alone. Pergament (2006) stated in his remarks, "Giese (the prosecutor in the Smith trial) told the jurors, "This is a case of selfishness—of I, I, I, and me, me, me."

My News, My Views

Female Violence (con't)

A woman who also killed her children, Darlie Routier was born in Pennsylvania in 1970. Routier's mother and step-father's relationship was filled with domestic violence when Routier was growing up. As an adult, Routier appeared to be a good mother to her children, initially. Some told of her high need to be the center of attention. As she rose in community standing and affluence, her first two children were often neglected and she seemed to be hampered by having to care for them. After the birth of her third child, she experienced postpartum depression characterized by mood swings and dark rages.

Routier and her husband began to have financial problems due to their elaborate lifestyle. In 1996, Routier contemplated suicide. She was accused of killing two of her children to improve her economic situation (Court TV's Crime Library, 2005). She was found guilty of killing one of the children and sentenced to death. Routier's attorneys have asked for a new trial based on new evidence not presented to the jury in the first trial.

Andrea Yates, who also had been suffering from postpartum depression and had attempted suicide, killed her five children on June 20, 2001. Her plea of not responsible due to mental defect is still being retried in the courts. She was isolated and distressed when she killed her home-schooled children. She and several in her family had long histories of mental illness. Because of her idealistic religious ideas about family, she kept her violent impulses to herself. She had several suicide attempts before she killed her children, and was taken off Haldol, an anti-psychotic drug, despite hallucinations and delusions.

She was released from the hospital when she could shower independently and began to eat. She remained in a near catatonic state. Her husband left her alone for a few hours and she drowned her children in the bathtub, chasing after the eldest, 7, who tried to get away. Andrea Yates is being held responsible for her actions. Who is holding the mental health system

responsible for providing substandard care in this case?

Female Killers – Single and Multiple Victims

Females are most likely to kill a spouse (19 percent of victims of female homicide), a friend/acquaintance (17 percent), or a boyfriend or girlfriend (10 percent) and least likely to kill an employee/er (.1 percent) or a sibling (1 percent) (BJS). Twelve percent of US homicide offenders (BJS) and 12 percent of identified serial killers are female (Newton, 2000). The motive for 41 percent of female serial killers is money (14 percent of male and female combined). Substance abuse is more likely to be involved when an abused woman murders her abusive male partner.

Lest we think that female violence is a new phenomenon, the first recorded case of a serial murderer was Locusta, a Roman woman of the first century, A.D. Locusta was hired by Agrippina the Younger, mother of Nero, to poison Agrippina's husband, the Emperor, Claudius and later, Claudius's son, heir to the throne. She was executed by order of the Roman Emperor, Galba in 69 A.D. (Newton, 2000).

Adult Females with No Behavior Problems

As a contrast to the aggressive and violent females, the characteristics of women with no behavior problems were assessed. One hundred percent of this group of women expressed remorse if they did something wrong. Only 11 percent had attachment problems and none had a severe attachment disorder. None were bullies. Five percent had deviant peers. Seven percent had been abused before the age of 5 and 4 percent had been neglected, while 23 percent had experienced abuse after the age of 4.



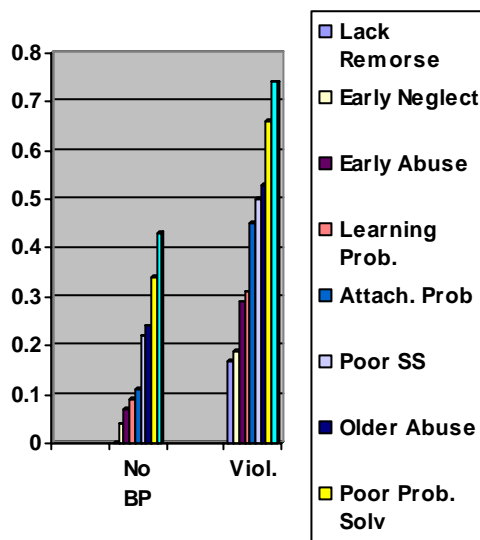
My News, My Views

Female Violence (con't)

Chart 2. Characteristics of women with no behavior problems

Characteristic	% that had the Trait
Lacked remorse	0
Poor Problem Solving Skill	34%
Attachment Problems	11%
Bullying Behaviors	0
Poor social Skills	22%
Deviant Peers	5%
Learning Problems	9%
Family Violence	43%
Early Abuse	7%
Early Neglect	4%
Older Abuse	24%

Figure 2. Characteristics of Women with No Behavior Problems Compared to Violent Women



As we can see, there are significantly more women who have experienced violence and who have skill deficits in the violent group than in the group with no behavior problems. This means that other factors contributed to helping the smaller percentage of no problem women to become pro-social and non-violent. So there is not a one-to-one relationship between abuse, neglect, and family violence and female adult violence; other factors come into play. This means that there are areas in which we can intervene and make a difference.

Conclusions

Research literature clearly shows that at least one source of female violence is the exposure to neglect, abuse, and domestic violence as a child. Early identification and intervention into violent homes is essential to stop the cycle of family violence. This is not to excuse the behavior but to prevent it in the future. Most mothers who kill their children are psychotic, under stress, isolated, have long histories of mental illness, and have been abused or exposed to domestic violence as children.

We can no longer ignore these precursors. As a society, we must intervene. A mental health system that does not recognize the risk for violence and returns women home to isolation and despair and then takes them off their medications is in part to blame. It is no longer sufficient to judge risk of future violence by professional judgment alone—which is only slightly better than chance. Available risk assessment tools validated for women must be used routinely in our mental health systems.

For more information go to www.drkathyseifert.com



Youth and family violence expert Dr. Kathy Seifert is one of the world's leading authorities at predicting which people are most likely to com-

My News, My Views

Female Violence (con't)

REFERENCES

Calhoun, G., Jurgens, J., & Chen, F. (1993, Summer). The neophyte female delinquent: A review of the literature. *Adolescence*, 28(110), 461-471.

Campbell, A. (1993). *Men, Women and Aggression*. New York: Basic Books.

Cunningham, A. (2000). Adolescent female aggression: Proposal for a research agenda. Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Canadian Psychological Association, June 29 to July 1, 2000, Ottawa.

Denfield, R. (1997). [Kill the Body, The Head Will Fall: A Closer Look at Women, Violence, and Aggression](#). New York, NY: Warner Books.

Dobash, R.P., Dobash, R.E., Wilson, M. and Daly, M. (1992). "The myth of sexual symmetrical in marital violence," *Social Problems*, 39(1):71-91.

Fiebert, M.S. (1997). References examining assaults by women on their spouses or male partners: An annotated bibliography. *Sexuality and Culture*, 1, 273-286.

King, K. (2003) *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the first woman apostle*. Polebridge Press.

Leschied, A., Cummings, A., Van Brunschot, M., Cunningham, A., & Saunders, A. (2000). *Female Adolescent Aggression: A Review of the Literature and the Correlates of Aggression* (User Report No. 2000-04). Ottawa: Solicitor General Canada.

McKee, G.R. and Shea, S.J. (1998). Maternal filicide: A cross-national comparison. [Journal of Clinical Psychology, Volume 54, Issue 5](#), Pages 679 - 687.

Published Online: 6 Dec 1998. Copyright © 1998 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Pergament, R. (2006). Susan Smith. Courtroom Television Network LLC. http://www.crimelibrary.com/notorious_murders/famous/smith.

Savoie, J. (1999). Youth Violent Crime. *Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics: Juristat*, 19(13).

Steffensmeier, D. and Haynie, D. (2000). A macrosocial gender-disaggregated analysis of adult and juvenile homicide offending rates, *Homicide Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 107-134.

Steffensmeier, D. and Haynie, D. (2000). The Structural Sources of Urban Female Violence in the United States. *Homicide Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 107-134
DOI: 10.1177/108876790000400200.
SAGE Publications.

Tarvis, Carol. (1993). *The Mismeasure of Woman*. Touchstone Bo

