

DOMESTIC HOMICIDE PROJECT

SPOTLIGHT BRIEFING #2: OLDER VICTIMS

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BACKGROUND

The Domestic Homicide Project (the Project), based in the Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme (VKPP), was established by National Police Chiefs' Council and the College of Policing. The Project was created in May 2020 through Home Office funding to collect, review, and share quick-time learning from all police-recorded domestic homicides and suspected suicides of individuals with a known history of domestic abuse victimisation during the Covid-19 pandemic. All police forces in England and Wales submit notice of relevant deaths to the project shortly after the death occurs. The research carried out by the Project is the first police-led work of its kind in England and Wales, aiming to establish the impact of the Covid-19 and restrictions on domestic homicides, and to learn lessons from every tragic death to seek to prevent future deaths. More detail, including key findings and recommendations, can be found in our first report, ['Domestic Homicides and Suspected Victim Suicides During the Covid-19 Pandemic 2020-2021'](#).

Spotlight Briefing #1 noted that 63% of victims of adult family homicide (AFH) were aged 55 and older, with the proportion of AFH victims increasing with age. This briefing examines the characteristic of age in more depth. It considers both older victims suspected to have been killed by a current or ex-intimate partner (Intimate Partner Homicide - IPH) as well as those killed by a family member (AFH). Although this briefing utilises a relatively small sample size, it provides emerging learning whilst the Project team continues analysis of identified patterns within the current year's (2021/22) data. Additionally, use of the term older victims in this briefing refers to individuals aged 65 years and older, with findings from other age groups discussed where relevant. Previous literature has also noted a dearth of research on homicides of older victims (Bows and Davies, 2019; HMICFRS 2019). This briefing addresses this gap by sharing new evidence around domestic homicides involving older victims and discussing the implications for risk assessment and practice ([pg. 6](#)).

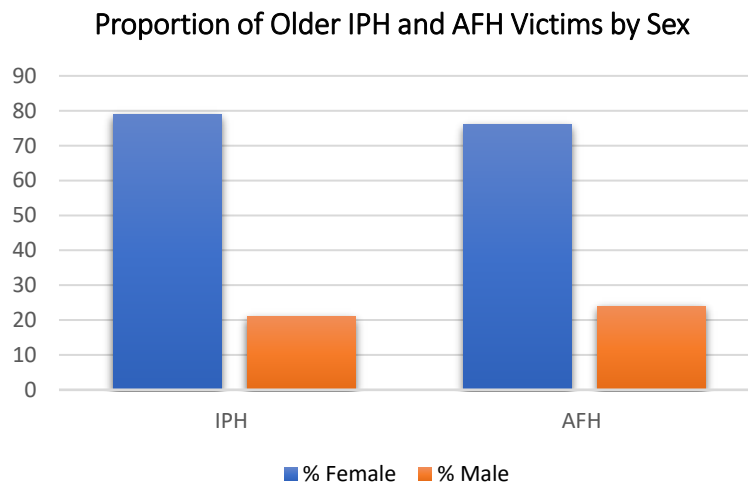
OLDER VICTIMS – KEY FINDINGS

Between 23rd March 2020 and 21st March 2021, the Project recorded a total of 145 deaths that were classified as adult family homicides (AFH, n = 40) or intimate partner homicides (IPH, n = 105). Of these 145 deaths, 36 (25%, one in four) victims were aged 65 and older. The data presented in this briefing relates to this sub-set of older victims.



Victim and Suspect Characteristics

Sex



Overall, 78% (n = 28) of the 36 older victims of intimate partner homicide (IPH) and adult family homicide (AFH) were female, whilst 22% (n = 8) were male. In contrast, 81% (n = 29) of the suspects associated with these deaths were male, whereas 19% (n = 7) were female. Notably, in all seven homicide-suicide deaths (where the suspect died by suicide after carrying out a homicide) involving older couples, the victim was female, and the suspect was male.

As shown in Spotlight Briefing #1, overall AFH deaths involved an even split by sex of the victim (male and female victims each representing 50%). However, when examining AFH of older victims, the proportion of female victims increased to a level similar to that of IPH. The proportion of male suspects remains high across all IPH and AFH deaths.

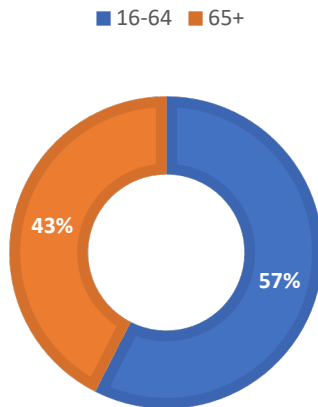
Relationship of victim to suspect

All suspects in IPH deaths involving older victims (n=19) were the current spouses of the victims. Of the 17 AFH deaths involving older victims, 71% (n = 12) of victims were a parent, and 29% (n = 5) were a grandparent suspected to have been killed by their child or grandchild, respectively. These victims include 9 mothers, 3 fathers, 4 grandmothers, and 1 grandfather.



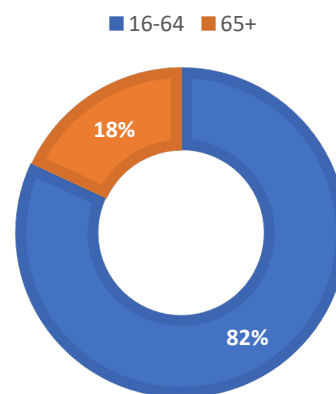
Age

AFH – Victim Age



In cases involving older victims of **Adult Family Homicide (AFH)**, suspects tended to be younger. None of the AFH suspects were aged 65 years or older (see Spotlight Briefing #1), which is commensurate with previous research around the killing of parents and grandparents by adult children and grandchildren (Bracewell et al., 2021; Montique, 2019; Sharp-Jeffs and Kelly, 2016).

IPH – Victim Age



Similar to the proportion of older victims of **Intimate Partner Homicide (IPH)** displayed on the right, 18% (20/111) of IPH suspects were also aged 65 years or older.

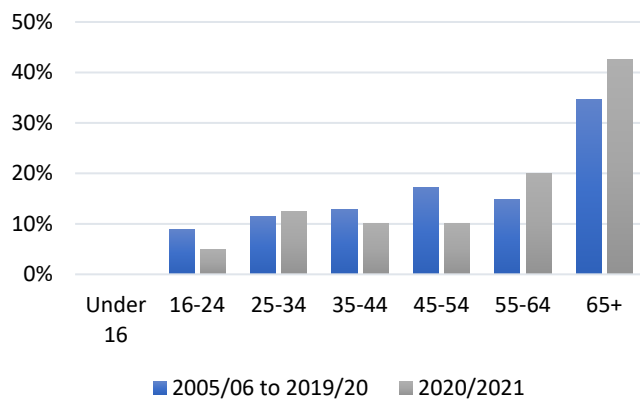
AFH demonstrates an older victim age profile than IPH (43% of AFH victims and 18% of IPH victims were aged 65 years or older). This is consistently supported by prior research (Bows and Davies, 2019; Holt, 2017; Montique, 2019).

Victim Age – During pandemic compared to previous years

During the pandemic, our findings suggest that older people were at increased risk of being victims of domestic homicide, especially within an intimate partner context.

To see whether victim age profile changed during the pandemic, the Project team re-analysed 15 years of data (2005/6 to 2019/20) from the Home Office Homicide Index (HO HI) to create a pre-pandemic comparison. Please note that the HO HI is a separate dataset with different methods of data collection; however, the figures below suggest that the pandemic saw a rise in domestic homicides of older victims, and especially between older couples, compared with previous years. As above, due to the relatively small sample size for 2020/2021, continued data collection will help determine the potential continuation and/or significance of these changes.

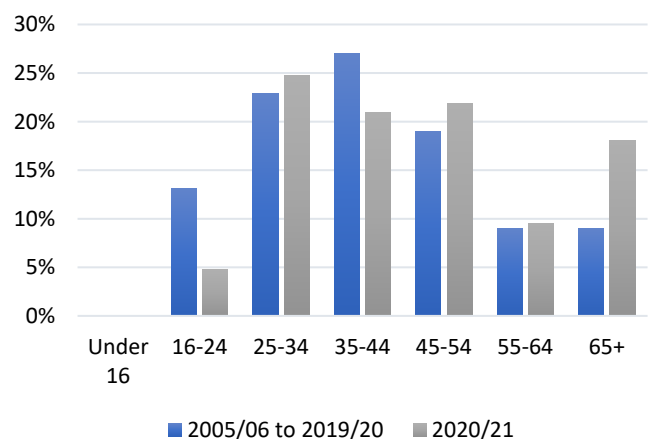
AFH Victims by Age Group - Comparison



During the first year of the pandemic, it seems the proportion of older victims of **Adult Family Homicide (AFH)** increased (from 35% to 43%).

An even larger increase appears to be seen in the proportion of older victims of **Intimate Partner Homicide (IPH)** during the pandemic (from 9% to 18%). There also seems to have been an increase in the proportion of IPH suspects aged 65 years and older (from 10% to 18%).

IPH Victims by Age Group - Comparison



During the first year of the pandemic 2020/21 there appears to have been a comparative decrease in the number of IPH deaths involving younger victims aged 16 to 24 years old (13% down to 5%) and suspects (10% down to 6%). This may indicate suppression of abuse amongst younger couples due to pandemic restrictions on movement and socialising.



KEY THEMATIC LEARNING: OLDER VICTIMS

Homicide-Suicide

Where older victims were killed by their partners, it was also common for the suspect to die by suicide. 54% of IPH homicide-suicides involved victims (and suspects) aged 65 or older.

Not known to police

Older couples involved in IPH were typically not previously known to police for domestic abuse, in contrast to cases involving younger couples.

Suspect as Carer - IPH

Older victims of IPH often had serious physical and/or mental health needs. In these cases, suspects were commonly caregivers for the victims.

Victim as Carer - AFH

Suspects of AFH deaths involving older victims often had a history of substance misuse and/or mental ill health. In these cases, victims were commonly caregivers for the suspects.

Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Older Victims

'Covid insights' were identified by police at higher rates in domestic homicides involving older victims as compared to those involving younger victims.

Police were asked to identify any insights about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the circumstances of the death. In several adult family homicide (AFH) cases involving the murder of an older victim by an adult child, the pandemic was reported to have disrupted mental health or drug/alcohol support available to the suspect, or the suspect was discharged into the care of their family members (see Spotlight #1 for further discussion about the killing of mothers by adult sons).

Covid-related impacts identified amongst older intimate partner homicide (IPH) and AFH victims included: the suspect's or victim's deteriorating mental and/or physical health during the pandemic; the suspect using Covid restrictions as an excuse not to access medical help for a partner or family member with serious (non-Covid) illness, and the suspect or victim described as struggling to care for a partner or family member with serious mental and/or physical illness based on lack, or disruption, of support from specialist services. These findings suggest that the pandemic may have put older victims at greater risk through (at least the perception of) reduced health and care support. This fits with the broader impact of the pandemic on older age groups, who were more likely to experience disruption to health services (Propper, Stockton and Stoye, 2020) and become less 'visible' to external agencies whilst shielding at home.



KEY LEARNING AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS FOR AGENCIES



Key message #1 – Initial data analysis suggests there were **more older victims (aged 65+) of domestic homicide during the pandemic** compared with previous years. Older victims were killed both by intimate partners and by adult children/grandchildren. Victims were most often female, whilst suspects were most often male.



Key message #2 – Suspects of homicides involving older victims were **not always known to police** for domestic abuse, particularly within the context of intimate partner homicides and homicide-suicides between older couples. However, the victim and/or suspect often had **known care and support needs**.



Key message #3 – ‘Covid insights’ suggest that **disrupted support services** to older couples and family members with caring responsibilities during the pandemic may have increased their risk of harm, including homicide.



Practice point #1 – Agencies should be aware that older (female) victims of domestic abuse seemed to be at greater risk of homicide during the pandemic and social restrictions, especially at the hands of an intimate partner. Agencies should ensure risk assessment tools sufficiently recognise the **risk posed to older victims of intimate partner and adult family abuse**.



Practice point #2 – Agencies should **discuss the needs of older victims** during domestic abuse partnership meetings. Working with older victim charities and/or care associations, police and partner agencies should also consider ways to reach out to older victims through **accessible communications campaigns** using a variety of methods (not just online or via social media).



Practice point #3 – Older individuals with physical and/or mental care needs may be **acutely vulnerable** to abuse at home during future pandemics or social restrictions. Agencies must **prioritise continued contact** with these individuals in such circumstances.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Bracewell, K., Jones, C., Haines-Delmont, A., Craig, E., Duxbury, J. and Chantler, K. (2021) ‘Beyond intimate partner relationships: utilising domestic homicide reviews to prevent adult family domestic homicide’, *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, pp. 1–16.

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