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AKVDRS Homicide and Legal Intervention Victims Update — Alaska, 2007–2011

Background

Homicide is a leading cause of injury deaths in Alaska. In 2011, Alaska's violent crime rate -- which includes acts of homicide, forcible rape, and robbery -- was 57% higher than the national rate (606.5 vs. 386.3 per 100,000 persons, respectively).¹ In 2010, homicides resulted in an estimated 1,502 years of potential life lost prior to age 65 years in Alaska.² This *Bulletin* provides an update on deaths due to homicide and legal intervention (i.e., justifiable homicide) from the Alaska Violent Death Reporting System (AKVDRS), an active surveillance system that collects risk factor data concerning all violent deaths that meet the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) case definitions.³

Methods

We reviewed AKVDRS data regarding deaths due to homicide and legal intervention from 2007–2011. Deaths were counted if the decedent was fatally injured in Alaska. Crude rates were calculated using the Alaska Department of Labor's population estimates data.

Summary Results

During 2007–2011, 191 victims of homicide (175, 92%) and legal intervention (16, 8%) were recorded in AKVDRS; the average number of victims was 38 per year (range: 27–52). These victims accounted for 15% of all violent deaths in Alaska during that time-period.³ Of the 191 victims, 140 (73%) were male; the median age was 35 years (range: 0–85). Twelve incidents involved multiple victims (range: 2–4).

The annual crude rate for victims of homicide and legal intervention was 5.5 per 100,000 persons. The annual crude rate among males was 2.6 times higher than among females (7.7 vs. 3.0 per 100,000 population, respectively). The highest annual crude rate by age was among persons aged 35–40 years (10.4 per 100,000 persons); the highest crude rate among persons aged <15 years was in children aged 0–4 years (3.7 per 100,000 persons). The highest annual crude rates by sex and age were among males aged 35–40 years and females aged 40–44 years (17.7 and 7.7 per 100,000 persons, respectively). The highest annual crude rates by race were in Alaska Native/American Indian persons (AI/AN), followed by Blacks, Asian/Pacific Islanders, and Whites (10.5, 8.8, 4.5, and 3.7 per 100,000 persons, respectively). The highest annual crude rates by region were in the Southwest and Northern regions (9.0 and 8.1 per 100,000 persons, respectively); the lowest rate was in the Gulf Coast region (3.1 per 100,000 persons).

The two most commonly documented incident characteristics were "precipitated by a crime over money, property, or drugs" (53, 28%), and "other argument, abuse, or conflict" (50, 26%; Figure). Most deaths (115, 60%) occurred in a home or apartment. Nine (5%) deaths occurred at the workplace.

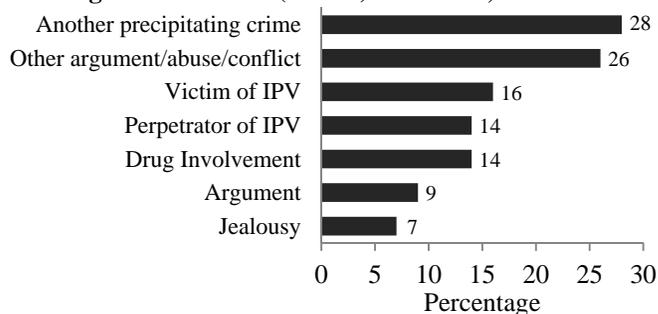
The type of weapon most frequently used to cause death was a firearm (106, 55%), followed by a sharp instrument (22, 12%), and personal weapons (e.g., fists, feet, and hands; 20, 10%).

Characteristics of the victim/suspect relationships associated with the 175 homicide victims were as follows:

- 108 (62%) victims were drinking and/or doing drugs at or near the time of the homicide;
- 47 (27%) victims were an acquaintance, friend, roommate, or schoolmate of the suspect;
- 30 (17%) victims were a family/household member of the suspect; and

- 15 (9%) victims were a current or former spouse or partner of the suspect.

Figure. Incident Characteristics of Deaths due to Homicide and Legal Intervention (N=191) — Alaska, 2007–2011



IPV = intimate partner violence related

Discussion

Compared to 2004–2008, Alaska's average annual crude rate for victims of homicide and legal intervention was 11% lower during 2007–2011 (6.2 vs. 5.5 per 100,000 persons, respectively).⁴ Alaska's homicide rates continue to remain highest among males, adults aged 35–40 years and children aged 0–4 years, and AI/AN. Similar to what is found nationally, the most common precipitating incident characteristics included criminal acts and interpersonal relationship problems.⁵ Moreover, nearly two-thirds of victims were drinking or doing drugs at or near the time of the incident, underscoring the importance of ongoing work to decrease substance use/abuse rates in Alaska.

These data also indicate that workplace homicides accounted for 5% of all homicides in Alaska. Homicides are a leading cause of fatal occupational injury nationally; risk factors for workplace violence include dealing with the public, the exchange of money, and the delivery of services or goods.⁶

In Alaska, future studies on the victim/suspect relationship, partner/family violence, and access to mental health services are warranted to help guide future prevention efforts.

Recommendations

1. Providers should familiarize themselves with recognizing abuse and domestic violence; educational materials are available at: <http://www.provena.org/usmc/body.cfm?id=741>
2. Providers should offer resources to help reduce stressors that exacerbate violence at home (e.g., community-based counseling services and safe haven programs).⁷

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