

The epidemiology and the pathology of suspected rape homicide in South Africa

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Abstract

Objective: To describe the epidemiology and forensic management of suspected rape homicide in South Africa, with the aim of promoting the recognition of this form of violence against women amongst forensic pathologists during post-mortem examination.

Methods: A retrospective national study in a proportionate random sample of 25 medico-legal laboratories was carried out to identify all homicides in 1999 of women over the age of 13 years. Data was collected from the mortuary file, autopsy report, police record and during interviews with police.

Findings: A rape homicide was suspected in 16.3% (95% confidence intervals (CI): 10.6–22.3) of the female homicides which gave a rape homicide rate of 3.65/100,000 women over 13 years. Rape homicides were more likely to than other female homicides to be crimes where the perpetrator and victim were strangers, where the crime happened in public spaces and the victim older than the perpetrator. In addition to genital injuries, injuries associated with this crime included those of head and face, legs, neck and injuries caused by bites. Victims had larger numbers of injuries, and more often a mechanism of death due to strangulation asphyxiation, or blunt trauma, rather than gunshot.

Conclusion: Rape homicide is an extreme form of violence against women and the prevalence in South Africa is higher than that of all female homicides in the United States. The particular pattern of injury found in these cases should be used to develop protocols for autopsies on murdered women to ensure that crucial evidence is not lost and the victims' and their families claim to justice is not compromised.

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1. Introduction

Rape homicide combines the two most extreme forms of violence against women, rape and murder, yet it has been given little attention from health researchers. Rape homicide statistics are available from the United States Federal Bureau of Investigations [1] and from a study of female homicide in Jamaica [2]. Almost all the published research on rape homicide has focused on the psycho-pathology of the offender [3–10], with most attention given to serial rape homicide [5,7–

10]. Only three articles published have described the demographic characteristics of rape homicide victims and injury patterns and these were small series of between 5 and 59 cases from single mortuaries [11–13].

While numerous advances have been made in the management of clinical sexual assault cases, including the publication of protocols and guidelines [14–18], for both children and adults, no empirically based guidelines and protocols have been developed for forensic medical examiners to prevent the loss of evidence in rape homicide cases. This paper which draws from a national study of female homicides in South Africa, describes the epidemiology of rape homicide in South Africa and explores the associated socio-demographic factors, indicators and patterns of injury.

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Table 1

Frequency and crude odds ratios of victim demographics and homicide characteristics for suspected rape homicides and non-rape homicides: South Africa 1999 (weighted estimates)

	Proportions		OR (95% CI)
	Suspected rape homicides (<i>n</i> = 561) % (95% CI)	Non-rape homicides (<i>n</i> = 2876) % (95% CI)	
Province ^a			
Western Cape	25.7 (16.9–37.2)	74.3 (62.8–83.1)	1.00
Gauteng	12.4 (5.8–24.5)	87.6 (75.5–94.2)	0.40 (0.15–1.08)
Kwa-Zulu Natal	5.1 (1.6–15.2)	94.3 (84.8–98.4)	0.15 (0.04–0.56)
Free State	20.4 (13.9–28.9)	79.6 (71.1–86.1)	0.73 (0.37–1.44)
Eastern Cape	18.6 (8.2–36.6)	81.4 (63.4–91.8)	0.65 (0.42–1.66)
Victim age (years)			
≤29	14.7 (8.8–23.5)	85.3 (76.5–91.1)	1.00
30–39	15.6 (10.1–23.3)	84.4 (76.7–89.9)	1.10 (0.63–1.90)
40–49	19.1 (10.1–33.1)	80.9 (66.9–89.9)	1.73 (0.77–3.87)
50+	20.2 (10.1–36.3)	79.8 (63.7–89.9)	1.11 (0.37–3.27)
Victim race ^{b,c}			
African	13.1 (8.8–19.1)	86.9 (80.9–91.0)	1.00
Coloured	24.3 (14.5–37.8)	75.7 (62.2–85.6)	1.40 (0.46–4.27)
White	31.5 (16.9–51.1)	68.5 (48.9–83.1)	3.29 (1.62–6.67)
Indian	9.5 (2.4–31.4)	90.5 (68.5–97.6)	1.39 (0.33–5.74)
Victim employment status ^c			
Unemployed/housewife	16.2 (10.7–23.6)	83.8 (76.4–89.2)	1.00
Domestic worker	19.8 (11.8–31.5)	80.2 (68.5–88.2)	1.21 (0.49–2.97)
Student	25.2 (8.2–56.0)	74.8 (43.9–91.8)	1.78 (0.42–7.61)
Farm worker	41.1 (17.8–69.1)	58.9 (30.9–82.2)	2.88 (0.73–11.28)
Street person	47.1 (26.3–68.9)	52.9 (31.1–73.7)	3.47 (1.58–7.61)
Pensioner	22.6 (7.8–50.0)	77.4 (49.9–92.2)	1.62 (0.52–5.07)
Other	12.8 (5.4–27.4)	87.2 (72.6–94.6)	0.97 (0.40–2.36)
Crime scene			
Home (victim/other) ^d	10.3 (6.1–16.8)	89.7 (83.2–93.9)	1.00
Urban public/recreational spaces	24.5 (15.8–35.8)	75.5 (64.2–84.2)	2.82 (1.62–4.89)
Rural public spaces	30.9 (18.2–47.4)	69.1 (52.6–81.8)	3.89 (1.70–8.91)
Work	19.5 (6.5–46.0)	80.5 (54.9–93.5)	2.11 (0.53–8.32)
Number of victims			
One victim	12.7 (9.2–17.3)	87.3 (82.7–90.8)	1.00
More than one victim	3.4 (1.4–8.3)	96.5 (91.7–98.6)	0.24 (0.09–0.63)

^a Other provinces—Mpumalanga, Northwest province, Northern Cape and Limpopo.

^b Previous racial categories used by the apartheid government.

^c Controlled for provinces.

^d Home (other) refer to the crime scene in a house that was not the home of the victim and does not refer to the home of the offender because police could not provide definitive information about whether the home belonged to the offender.

2. Methods

Data for this analysis were drawn from a large national retrospective study of female murders occurring between 1 January to 31 December 1999 in South Africa and estimates for suspected rape homicides were calculated. Details of the study design and the instruments used to identify female murders have been described in more detail elsewhere [19]. The sampling frame consisted of 225

medico-legal laboratories which were operating at the time. These were stratified by size based on the number of autopsies performed per annum (small <500 autopsies, medium 500–1499 autopsies, large >1499 autopsies). A stratified random sample of 25 medico-legal laboratories was drawn using proportional allocation. Within each of the sampled laboratories all women over the age of 13 years (14 years is the age at which dating commences) who had been killed by another person in circumstances that were not accidental were identified.

Table 2

Frequencies and crude odds ratios of perpetrators characteristics and outcome of cases for suspected rape homicides and non-rape homicides: South Africa 1999 (weighted estimates)

	Proportions		OR (95% CI)
	Suspected rape homicide (<i>n</i> = 561) % (95% CI)	Non-rape homicide (<i>n</i> = 2876) % (95% CI)	
Age (years)			
≤29	16.2 (10.4–24.4)	83.7 (75.6–89.6)	1.00
30–39	15.2 (9.1–24.2)	84.8 (75.8–90.9)	0.92 (0.46–1.84)

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