

Key findings & IFAS recommendations: An analysis of Domestic Homicide Reviews with suffocation and smothering

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In this analysis of 16 DHRs by suffocation or smothering:

- The majority of victims were female (14 female and 2 male victims) and the majority of perpetrators were male (15 male and 5 female - in three cases, there was more than one perpetrator, n = 20).
- The most common age group for victims was 60+ years old (6/16) and the most common age group for perpetrators was 30-39 years old (6/20).
- In half of the DHRs the victim's and perpetrator's ethnicities were not included.
- Relationships between victim and perpetrator included; child-parent, intimate partner / spouse, acquaintances (e.g. friends of perpetrator), grandchild-grandparent and sibling. In 7/16 of the cases the perpetrators were also reported to have been carers or informal supporters of the victim.
- In 14/16 cases the victims were killed in their own homes.
- The methods of killing varied but all included some form of suffocation/asphyxia e.g., through use of a pillow or plastic bag.
- Vulnerabilities of the victims included the victims being children, alcohol or drug dependency, mental health difficulties and/or experiences of domestic abuse.
- Vulnerabilities of the perpetrators included mental health difficulties and alcohol or drug dependency.
- Previous domestic abuse was reported in some of the DHRs. However, non-fatal suffocation was not recorded in any of the histories, despite suffocation being used as the eventual method of killing.
- Suffocation may be a different form of homicide compared to other domestic homicides – some cases included vulnerable, sometimes elderly, spouses unable to support one another and perhaps not being adequately supported by adult social care. This is not necessarily a typical pattern of domestic abuse.

Method:

1. IFAS retrieved 396 published DHRs from 90 Community Safety Partnerships.
2. 16 cases were identified and included in this analysis.
3. Each DHR was read in detail and questions were asked around the nature of the homicide and the quality of the DHR and its process.

IFAS Recommendations

Research:

- Whether suffocation homicides are more frequently carried out on older vulnerable people compared to other forms of homicide (e.g., death by beating).
- Whether diagnoses such as dementia statistically make older people more vulnerable to suffocation domestic homicide.

Practice:

- DHR system improvement:
 - Clear information on victim and perpetrator details,
 - consideration around the feasibility of the 6 month completion timeframe,
 - consideration around the independence of panel Chairs,
 - exploration regarding why families may not engage with the process.
- Consistency in carers' assessments.
- Improved mental health support community support.
- Professional curiosity in relation to service-user engagement in support (or lack thereof).
- Improved record keeping.
- Improved understanding of the nature of suffocation domestic homicide.