Reproductive-Age Women Are Overrepresented Among Perpetrators of Husband Killing

Todd K. Shackelford*

Division of Science—Psychology, Florida Atlantic University, Davie, Florida

: :

When a woman kills her husband, it is almost always an unplanned action of self-defense against a battering husband or a last-ditch attempt to survive a batterer's tyranny. Younger, reproductive-age women are battered and killed by husbands at higher rates than are older, postreproductive-age women. Because husband killing occurs in the context of self-defense or as a last-ditch effort to survive, reproductive-age women should kill their husbands at higher rates than do postreproductive-age women. I used a sample of 8,077 husband killings to test this hypothesis. Results support the hypothesis and document that (1) the highest rates of husband killing are for the youngest women, (2) the youngest husbands are at greatest risk of being killed by their wives, (3) women married to older men kill their husbands at higher rates than do women married to same-age men and women married to younger men, and (4) reproductive-age women kill their husbands at higher rates than do postreproductive-age women across two groups: women married to younger men and women married to older men. Discussion suggests directions for future work that can improve the identification of women at greatest risk for husband killing. Aggr. Behav. 26:309–317, 2000.   © 2000 Wiley-Liss, Inc.

: :

INTRODUCTION

Conflict between spouses occurs in every marriage. Sometimes conflict can escalate to physical violence and even to murder. The circumstances in which a husband kills his wife differ from those in which a wife kills her husband. Wife killing often occurs following a lengthy period of control, intimidation, and physical battery by a sexually jealous man [Daly and Wilson, 1988; Daly et al., 1982]. Husband killing rarely occurs as the end point of control, intimidation, and battery by a sexually jealous wife. When women kill their husbands, it is usually an unplanned action of self-defense against a

battering husband or a last-ditch attempt to escape the tyranny of a battering husband [e.g., Barnard et al., 1982; Browne, 1987; Chimbos, 1978; Daniel and Harris, 1982; Goetting, 1987; Jones, 1980; Jurik and Winn, 1990; Totman, 1978; Wilibanks, 1983]. For example, in Browne's [1987] interview study of 36 women who killed their husbands, a history of abuse by the husband was documented in all 36 cases. In Totman's [1978] interview study of 30 women incarcerated in a California state prison for killing their husbands, a history of abuse by the husband was documented in 29 cases. In a study of 56 women arrested for killing their husbands during 1982 and 1983 in Detroit, Michigan, Goetting [1987] found evidence that 54 of the women had been beaten repeatedly by their husband. Jurik and Winn [1990] found evidence of a history of physical battery by a husband in 18 of 21 cases of husband killing occurring between 1979 and 1984 in Phoenix, Arizona.

Across these studies, the battered women explicitly mentioned that they killed their husbands either in self-defense or as a last-ditch effort to survive. In the few cases in which no evidence could be found for a history of wife battery, the women provided very different reasons for killing their husbands. In one case presented by Goetting [1987], e.g., the woman killed her husband after surreptitiously securing several insurance policies on his life. In summary, the overwhelming majority of women who kill their husbands have been subjected to a long history of physical battery and usually commit the killing in self-defense or as a last-ditch effort to survive the batterer's tyranny.

Not all women are at equal risk for battery and death by a husband. Younger, reproductive-age women are battered and killed by husbands at higher rates than are older, postreproductive-age women [Daly and Wilson, 1988; Shackelford et al., 2000; Wilson et al., 1995]. Because husband killing typically occurs in the context of self-defense or as a last-ditch effort to survive, reproductive-age women should kill their husbands at higher rates than postreproductive-age women. I obtained access to data on several thousand husband killings to test the hypothesis that reproductive-age women kill their husbands at higher rates than do postreproductive-age women.

Spouses tend to be similar in age, so that younger women tend to be married to younger men and older women tend to be married to older men [see Buss, 1994]. Younger men commit the majority of violence and homicides [Wilson and Daly, 1985], so perhaps reproductive age women are at greater risk for uxoricide or wife killing as an incidental byproduct of marriage to younger, more homicidal men. Recent research refutes this possibility, finding that reproductive-age women incur greater risk of uxoricide than do postreproductive-age women, regardless of the age of their husbands [Shackelford et al., 2000].

Nevertheless, if reproductive-age women kill their husbands at higher rates than do postreproductive-age women, might this be because reproductive-age women tend to be married to younger, more violent men? This potential confound can be addressed in two ways. First, one can examine husband killing rate as a function of the age difference between spouses. According to the hypothesis that reproductive-age women are at special risk for husband killing, women married to older men should kill their husbands at higher rates than women married to same-age men and women married to younger men. This is because women married to older men are more likely to be of reproductive age than are women married to same-age men and women married to younger men. This pattern of results would indicate that higher rates of husband kill-

ing by younger, reproductive-age women are not solely attributable to marriage to younger husbands.

A second way to address the potential confounding of husband's age with wife's age is to compare the husband killing rates of reproductive-age women and postreproductive-age women across two groups: women married to younger men and women married to older men. If reproductive-age women kill their husbands at higher rates than do postreproductive-age women, and if this rate differential is not attributable to husband's age, than reproductive-age women should kill their husbands at higher rates than do postreproductive-age women, regardless of husband's age.

In summary, the present research tests the hypothesis that reproductive age women kill their husbands at higher rates than do postreproductive-age women and that these rate differentials are not attributable to husband's age. To test this hypothesis, I obtained access to a large database of husband killings that coded wife's age and husband's age.

METHODS
Database

The United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) requests information from each state on criminal homicides. Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHRs) include incident-level data on every reported homicide, including the relationship of the victim to the offender and the ages of the victim and offender. The database analyzed for the present project includes SHRs for the years 1976 to 1994 [Fox, 1996], providing information on 429,729 homicides. Husband killing rates were calculated according to relevant population estimates provided by the United States Census (available from the author on request).

Procedures

Of the more than 400,000 cases of homicide included in the database, 8,077 were cases in which a woman killed the man to whom she was legally married. All analyses were restricted to these cases. The average age of victims was 41.4 years (SD = 12.8 years), ranging from 17 to at least 98 years (ages 98 years and older were coded in the database as 98 years; one such case each was included among the victims and perpetrators). The average age of perpetrators was 37.5 years (SD = 12.0 years), ranging from 12 to at least 98 years.

RESULTS

Figure 1 shows husband killings per million married men per annum as a function of wife's age. The husband killing rate is highest for teenage women who have the greatest reproductive value, or expected future reproduction [Buss, 1994]. The clear trend is for the husband killing rate to decrease with the reproductive value of the woman. Older, postreproductive-age women kill their husbands at much lower rates than do younger, reproductive-age women.

I next investigated whether younger men were overrepresented among the victims of husband killings. Figure 2 shows husband killings per million married men per annum as a function of husband's age. Relatively younger men are killed by their wives at greater rates than are relatively older men. The highest husband killing rate is for men
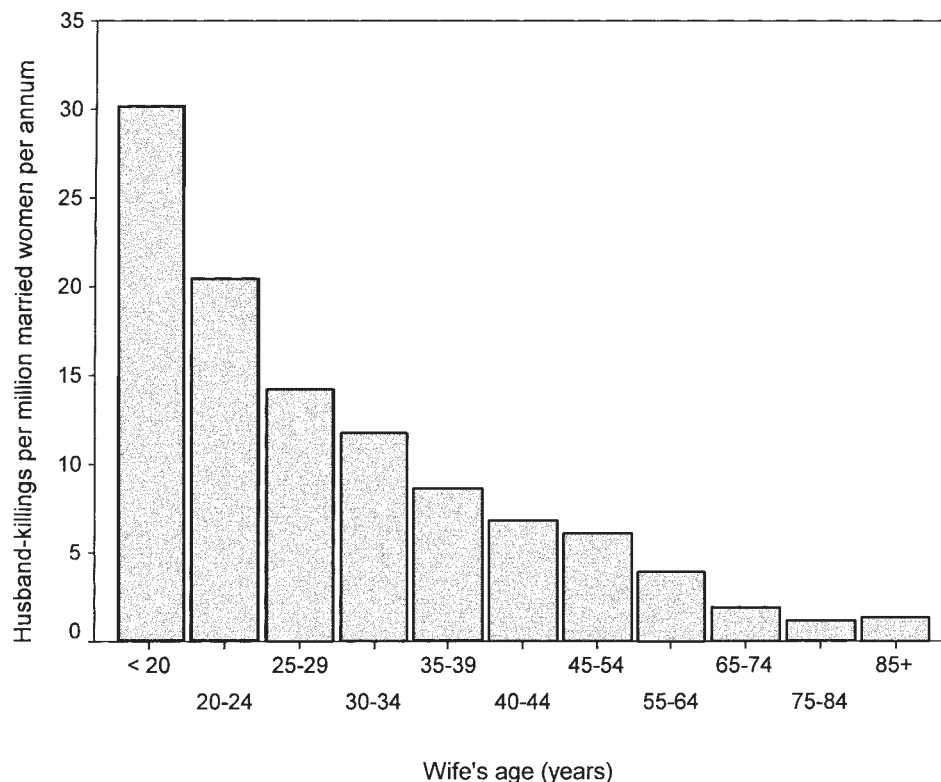
Fig. 1.   Husband killings per million married women per annum as a function of wife's age.

in their teens. Paralleling the husband killing perpetration rates for women, the clear trend in husband killing victimization rates for men is a decrease with age.

I next conducted an analysis to identify whether women married to relatively older men are at particularly high risk for perpetrating husband killings. To facilitate future work on the relationship between husband killing rate and spousal age discrepancy, I constructed Table I. As far as I know, no previous work has presented detailed information about husband killing rate as a function of the age discrepancy between spouses. For the present project, my interest was in comparing the husband killing rate of women married to relatively older men with the husband killing rates of women married to same-age men and relatively younger men. Women at greatest risk of killing their husbands are younger than 25 years and married to men between 35 and 44 years old. Women who are toward the end of their reproductive years, between the ages of 35 and 44 years, and married to men in the 35- to 44-year-old age bracket, kill their husbands at one-fifteenth the rate of women younger than 25 years who are married to men aged 35 to 44 years. Other age pairings show similar trends.

Figure 3 is constructed from the data in Table I and shows husband killings per million married couples per annum as a function of spousal age difference, in categories. In this figure, "1" indicates a one-category difference between the age of a husband and the age of his wife, "2" indicates a two-category difference, and so on. Positive values refer to categorical differences in which a husband is older than his wife, whereas
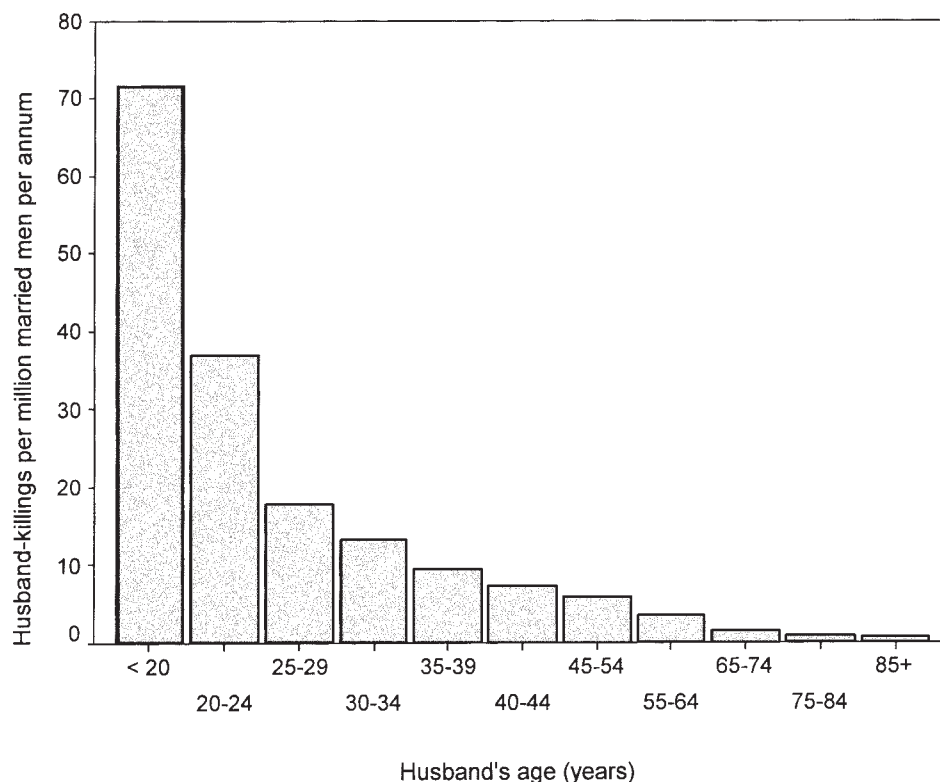
Fig. 2.   Husband killings per million married men per annum as a function of husband's age.

negative values refer to categorical differences in which a wife is older than her husband. "0" refers to cases in which the husband and wife are in the same age category. Figure 3 shows that husband killing rates for women married to relatively older men are higher than husband killing rates for women married to same-age men and relatively younger men. For example, the husband killing rate for women married to men who are older by three age categories is more than seven times higher than the husband killing rate for women married to same-age men and more than three times higher than

TABLE I. Husband Killings per Million Married Couples per Annum, by Husband's Age and Wife's Age*

Husband's age	Wife's age							
	<25	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65–74	75–84	85+
<25	27.04	26.70	45.46	10.00	N/A	N/A	0.00	N/A
25–34	24.15	9.66	13.02	31.11	19.09	10.00	N/A	N/A
35–44	95.56	13.38	6.48	10.83	34.74	22.00	0.00	N/A
45–54	74.09	37.87	8.67	5.08	9.09	5.53	10.00	N/A
55–64	71.82	48.70	20.00	6.49	3.46	6.15	6.88	N/A
65–74	52.00	61.82	39.07	9.26	2.67	1.68	1.35	4.55
75–84	N/A	22.00	13.13	21.25	4.86	1.07	1.09	0.93
85+	N/A	0.00	N/A	10.00	N/A	7.71	1.03	1.19

*N/A = population estimate of zero; therefore, rate could not be computed.
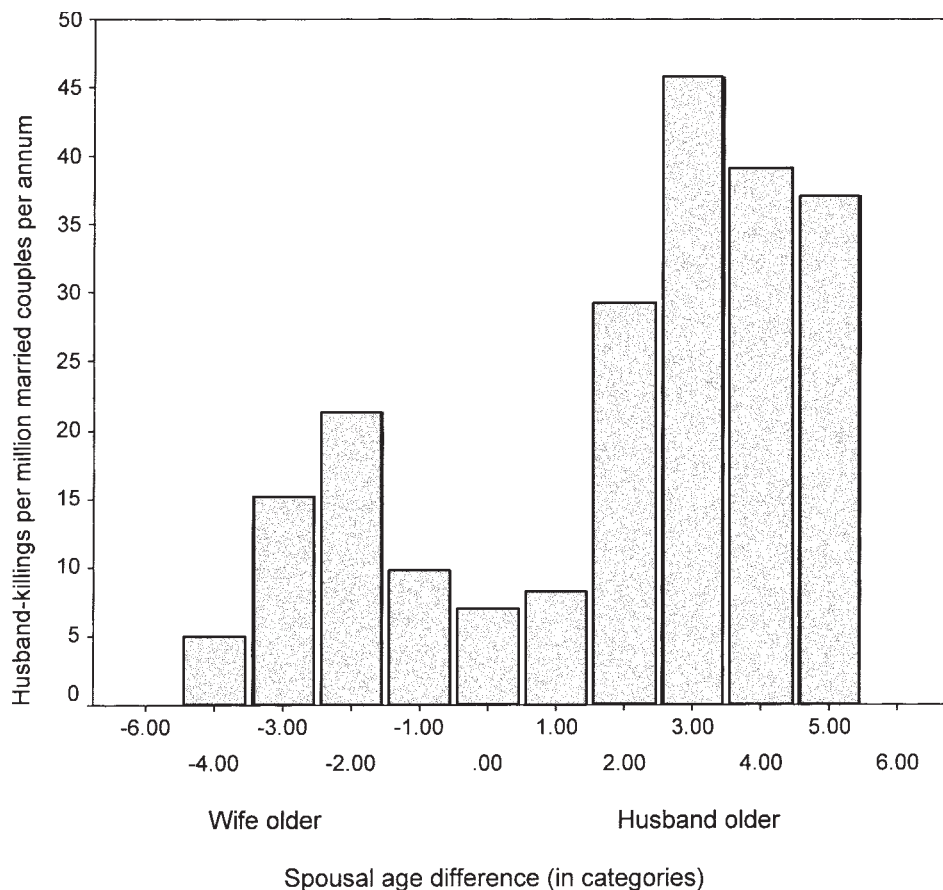
Fig. 3.   Husband killings per million married couples per annum as a function of spousal age difference, in categories. "1.00" indicates a one-category difference between the age of husband and age of wife, "2.00" indicates a two-category difference, and so on. Positive values refer to categorical differences in which husband is older than wife, whereas negative values refer to categorical differences in which wife is older than husband. "0" refers to cases in which husband and wife are in the same age category. Categories are as follows, in years: younger than 25, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, 55–64, 65–74, 75–84, and 85 and older.

the husband killing rate for women married to men who are younger by three age categories.

A critical test of the hypothesis that reproductive-age women are at special risk for husband killing is to compare the husband killing rates for reproductive-age women and postreproductive-age women across two groups: women married to younger men and women married to older men. If husband killings are perpetrated primarily by women in self-defense or out of desperation following years of battering, and if reproductive-age women are at special risk for battering by a sexually proprietary husband, then reproductive age women should kill their husbands at higher rates than postreproductive-age women, and this should be true for women married to younger men and women married to older men. This is precisely what Figure 4 reveals.

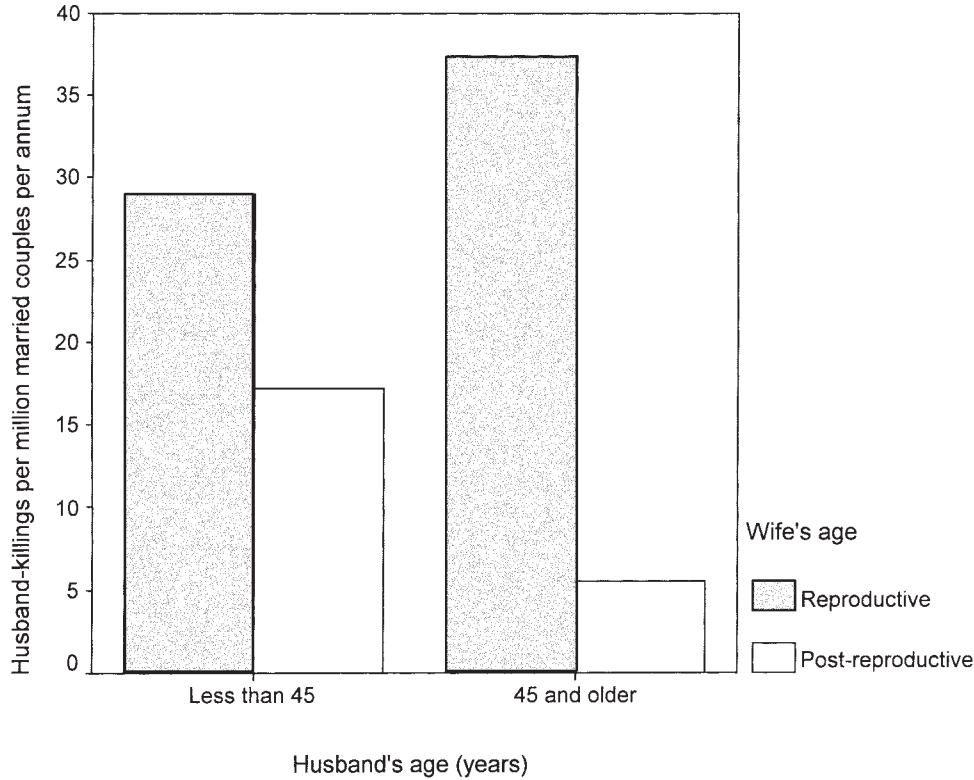Figure 4 is constructed from the data in Table I and shows husband killings per mil-

Fig. 4. Husband killings per million couples per annum as a function of husband's age and wife's reproductive status. Reproductive-age women are younger than 45 years, whereas postreproductive-age women are 45 years and older.

lion couples per annum as a function of husband's age and wife's reproductive status. The husband killing rate for reproductive-age women (<45 years) is higher than the husband killing rate for postreproductive-age women (45 years and older) for marriages to younger men and for marriages to older men. Among women married to younger men, reproductive-age women killed their husbands at 1.7 times the rate of postreproductive-age women. Among women married to older men, reproductive-age women killed their husbands at 7.6 times the rate of postreproductive-age women. These rate differentials across husband age categories provide strong evidence that reproductive-age women kill their husband at a higher rate than do postreproductive-age women and that this rate differential is not attributable to husband's age.

DISCUSSION

Using a sample of nearly a half million homicides, I selected for analysis the 8,077 cases in which a woman killed the man to whom she was legally married. The data included information that allowed me to test the hypothesis that reproductive-age women kill their husbands at higher rates than do postreproductive-age women, and that these rate differentials are not attributable to husband's age. The results support this hypoth-

esis and document that (1) the highest rates of husband killing are for the youngest, most reproductively valuable women and (2) the youngest husbands are at greatest risk of being killed by their wives. The results also show that (3) women married to relatively older men kill their husbands at a higher rate than do women married to same-age men and women married to relatively younger men. The latter finding casts doubt on the possibility that the greater husband-killing rate among reproductive-age women is an incidental byproduct of marriage to younger, more violent men.

Stronger support for the hypothesis that reproductive age women are at special risk for perpetrating husband killing is provided by the finding that reproductive-age women kill their husbands at higher rates than do postreproductive-age women across two groups of women: those married to younger men and those married to older men. These results suggest that there is something special about reproductive age women that makes them more likely to kill their husbands relative to postreproductive-age women. That "something special" may be that reproductive-age women incur greater risk of husband-perpetrated battery and homicide than do postreproductive-age women [Daly and Wilson, 1988; Shackelford et al., 2000; Wilson et al., 1995]. One important direction for future work is to identify the underlying causes of reproductive-age women's greater risk of battery and, consequently, the higher rates at which reproductive-age women kill their husbands. One possibility, e.g., is that reproductive-age women, relative to postreproductive-age women, are more likely to be sexually unfaithful to their husband—or to arouse suspicions of infidelity in their husband. Reproductive-age women may trigger sexual jealousy more often or more intensely than do postreproductive-age women. A husband's sexual jealousy, in turn, can fuel wife battery [Daly and Wilson, 1988, 1996]. This chain of causality might, in part, explain why reproductive age women are overrepresented among the perpetrators of husband killing.

Previous work documents that reproductive-age women are more violent than postreproductive-age women in several contexts, including mate attraction and mate retention [see, e.g., Campbell, 1995]. Perhaps the current results can be accounted for by the greater violence displayed by reproductive-age women, relative to postreproductive-age women, in these several contexts? Perhaps, but it is not at all clear how this aids in explaining *why* and *under what conditions* a woman might kill her husband. Or *why* and *under what conditions* a woman might behave violently or even homicidally toward the woman with whom her boyfriend is having an affair. If we hope to learn more about issues such as husband killing, we must avoid for now blanket statements such as "reproductive-age women are generally more violent than postreproductive-age women" because these blanket statements discourage the search for deeper and more comprehensive explanations.

Two limitations of the current project are attributable to limitations of the FBI SHR database. First, this database does not provide information on whether the homicidal woman was battered by her husband. Instead, I have assumed that husband-killings in this database were preceded by wife battery. Previous work (reviewed in the Introduction) suggests that this is a reasonable assumption. Second, and more generally, the FBI SHR database is limited in the breadth and depth of information provided on each homicide. Although the present research identifies one important predictor of husband killing—wife's age or reproductive status—we have much to learn about why some women kill their husbands that cannot be gleaned from the FBI SHR database. For example, do women who kill their husbands share a particular constellation of person-

ality traits? Among women who are battered, are those that are battered more frequently or more severely more likely to kill their husbands, as suggested by Browne's [1987] pioneering work?

In summary, the current research documents that younger, reproductive-age women are overrepresented among the perpetrators of husband killing and that this overrepresentation is not solely attributable to husband's age. We know very little else about husband killings, the relationship characteristics of these ill-fated marriages, or the personality traits of perpetrators and victims, for example. A better understanding of the causes of husband killings will place us in a better position to identify women at greatest risk for killing their husbands and men at greatest risk for getting killed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

REFERENCES

Barnard GW, Vera H, Vera MI, Newman G. 1982. Till death do us part: a study of spousal murder. Bull Am Acad Psychiatry Law 10:271–280.

Browne A. 1987. When battered women kill. New York: Macmillan/Free Press.

Buss DM. 1994. The evolution of desire. New York: Basic Books.

Campbell A. 1995. A few good men: evolutionary psychology and female adolescent aggression. Ethol Sociobiol 16:99–123.

Chimbos PD. 1978. Marital violence. San Francisco: R & R Research Associates.

Daly M, Wilson M. 1988. Homicide. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

Daly M. Wilson MI. 1996. Male sexual proprietariness and violence against wives. Curr Directions Psychol Sci 5:2–7.

Daly M, Wilson M, Weghorst SJ. 1982. Male sexual jealousy. Ethol Sociobiol 3:11–27.

Daniel AE, Harris PW. 1982. Female homicide offenders referred for pretrial psychiatric examination: a descriptive study. Bull Am Acad Psychiatry Law 10:261–269.

Fox JA. 1996. Uniform Crime Reports [United States]: Supplementary Homicide Reports, 1976-1994 [computer file]. ICPSR version. Boston: Northeastern University, College of Criminal Justice [producer]. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor].

Goetting A. 1987. Homicidal wives: a profile. J Fam Issues 8:332–341.

Jones A. 1980. Women who kill. New York: Fawcett Columbine Books.

Jurik NC, Winn R. 1990. Gender and homicide: a comparison of men and women who kill. Violence Vict 5:227–242.

Shackelford TK, Buss DM, Peters J. 2000. Wife killing: risk to women as a function of age. Violence Vict. In press.

Totman J. 1978. The murderess. San Francisco: R & R Research Associates.

Wilibanks W. 1983. The female homicide offender in Dade County, Fla. Criminal Justice Rev 8:9–14.

Wilson M, Daly M. 1985. Competitiveness, risk taking, and violence: the young male syndrome. Ethol Sociobiol 6:59–73.

Wilson M, Johnson H, Daly M. 1995. Lethal and nonlethal violence against wives. Can J Criminol 37:331–361.