

5-2022

How Life During a Pandemic May Have Contributed to Homicide in Houston, Texas

Ciarra Hastings Blow
Prairie View A&M University, chastings1@pvamu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/jfs>

Recommended Citation

Hastings Blow, Ciarra (2022) "How Life During a Pandemic May Have Contributed to Homicide in Houston, Texas," *Journal of Family Strengths*: Vol. 21: Iss. 2, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/jfs/vol21/iss2/5>

The *Journal of Family Strengths* is brought to you for free and open access by CHILDREN AT RISK at DigitalCommons@The Texas Medical Center. It has a "cc by-nc-nd" Creative Commons license" (Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives) For more information, please contact digitalcommons@exch.library.tmc.edu

How Life During a Pandemic May Have Contributed to Homicide in Houston, Texas

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr. Camille Gibson for assisting me with the topic and being my editor-in-chief.

How Life During a Pandemic May Have Contributed to Homicide in Houston, Texas

Background and the Houston Context

The global pandemic of 2020 caused many hardships for families who were unprepared for the social, health, and economic fallout. COVID-19 or SARS-CoV-2, originated in Wuhan, China, in 2019 (Bloom et al., 2021). Its rapid spread forced the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare it a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (Escandon-Barbosa et al., 2021). In the United States routine activities of life stopped (such as going to work, going out to eat with friends, or going to school face-to-face) and many service businesses were closed. As a result, many persons on the margins of earnings were suddenly without an income. This left many homes with individuals feeling desperate and mentally challenged, given financial stress, interpersonal conflicts, and in some cases, unaddressed exacerbated mental illness (Gruber et al., 2021). During these times, the homicide rate in Houston, Texas, reached heights that have not been seen since 1993 (ABC13, 2020 citing Houston Police Department data). The pandemic had apparently forced some persons into living situations and illegal activity while feeling emotions of despair and desperation that could easily erupt into violence.

This study contributes to the literature an understanding of the possible impact of COVID-19 on domestic disputes and homicides in Houston. There was an increase in homicides from 242 in 2014 to 275 in 2019 (pre-pandemic), to 405 in 2020 (first year of the pandemic restrictions on movement). The state of Texas had increased homicides rates from 4.3/100,000 in 2014 to 4.9/100,000 in 2019 to 6.6/100,000 in 2020 (Uniform Crime Report, 2021). According to media reports, it is possible that pandemic-related economic stress, forces people to interact or live in volatile social situations. With increased access to lethal weapons, in a city short on judges, prosecutors and law enforcement officers dangerous persons were able to move about

ready to kill if pushed or aggravated. This has been suggested in local news stories from 2020. Indeed, in one year, Houston had a 55% increase in homicides with a gun (from 221 killings in 2019 to 343 for 2020) (Uniform Crime Report, 2021). In Harris County, where most of Houston, TX is located, from 2015 to 2020 exactly 63,370 persons received new charges while on bond. Houston police indicate that during this time, 231 persons were murdered by individuals who were out on bond in Harris County (Wedding, 2021). Nationally, in 2020, homicides increased 29.4% from 2019. According to the FBI, this is the largest single year increase since 1968 when the increase was 12.7%. Further, while property crime fell 7.8% (which would be expected with persons staying in place), violence increased 5.6% (Uniform Crime Report 2021).

The problems addressed in the present research are the factors that played into the increased homicide rate in Houston during 2020. COVID-19 brought about a new ordinary which included less police presence (as officers were out ill with COVID), forced self-isolation, a lack of safe space for women/children who were victims of abuse, and other mentally damaging factors. Police officers became less effective in preventing crime and instead dealt more with its aftermath (Martin, 2020). The job loss experienced by many residents was different from previous bouts of mass job loss when the stock market was a direct cause. This time, there was a virus that came out of seemingly nowhere, as the cause (Kawohl, 2020). There was no set date of when the stay-at-home orders would lift, and the fragile human psyche was faced with prolonged durations of uncertainty. Under the strain, some turned to crime for subsistence (Boman IV & Gallupe, 2020; Kawohl, 2020). Thus, a primary objective of this study was to determine if COVID-19 isolation dynamics were related to the increase in the homicide rate.

Literature Review

Pandemic Trends

Home is not a happy place when people do not get along. If we add to this: overcrowded spaces, a loss of income, the noise of children, this can be a rather volatile mix, prime for violence. COVID-19 left a lasting effect on the world in terms of interpersonal relationships. The pandemic was beneficial to individuals who had a good/strong relationship with their parents or significant other, but some did not (Philippe et al., 2020). For example, there are children for whom their safe space was at school Monday through Friday where they would receive at least two hot meals a day and avoid parental abuse (Sell, 2020). According to Sell (2020), when schools closed due to COVID-19, the rate of reported child abuse decreased. A likely reason is that with children at home, teachers and other professionals could not physically see the children, and report any suspected abuse (Sell, 2020). Child abuse can take many norms, including physical abuse (i.e., slapping, punching, kicking, and various other means that can leave bruises) (Childhelp, 2021), mental/emotional abuse (i.e., negative conversations, hateful speech towards or about the child, and various other forms that can destroy a child's self-worth and self-esteem) (Banyard et al., 2017), and sexual abuse (i.e., inappropriate touching or sexual intercourse with a child) (Childhelp, 2021). The main form of abuse that teachers witness is neglect (i.e., a parent not feeding, clothing, or overall taking care of the child in their custody) (CASA Speaks, 2021).

In some cases of child neglect, the issue lies with the parent not being able to afford to take adequate care of the child. When work paused for many parents in 2020, their only income was the government stimulus checks and later, the monthly child tax credit benefits (Jorss, 2021). Under economic strain, stress, and uncertainty many relationships in forced social isolation were not harmonious. By April 2020, the Houston Women's Center reported a 40% increase in calls from persons reporting domestic victimization (Ortegon & Proctor, 2020).

Typically, during a natural disaster or even previous pandemics that forced individuals to isolate themselves from their significant other, there would be a noticeable positive trend in the birth rate of children (Cohan & Cole, 2002; Rodgers et al., 2005; Fergusson et al., 2015). The same trend would be present with the divorce rate. COVID-19 completely changed these trends. There was a noticeable decrease in both the birth rate and the divorce rate for one main reason – economics (Manning & Payne, 2021). Currently, the starting cost of raising a child ranges from \$200,000 – \$300,000, which does not include extra-curricular activities that children may pursue, health bills, and daycare (Kirkham, 2021). The divorce rate decreased for the same reason. Many individuals could not afford to get divorced, given the cost of hiring a lawyer to process the paperwork and the cost involved in splitting assets (Mallozzi, 2021; Wang, 2020). People determined which situation was the lesser of the two evils – get divorced and potentially struggle or stay married/remain unhappy but maintain a steady living situation. Some of the benefits include pooling their money together to make the cost of living easier, or if they already own a home both parties only need to contribute to one set of bills plus the mortgage.

Another likely impactful trend was the increase in firearm and ammunition sales during the pandemic including following the 2020 riots and protests in the aftermath of the police killing of George Floyd who grew up in Houston. Apparently, some of these gun buyers feared civil unrest (Gibson, 2020; McIntyre, 2021; Nieves & Waldrop, 2021). Surprisingly, Texas recently responded to ongoing conservative concerns about a society descending into chaos with a 2021 law that removed the requirement to take a gun license course or obtain a gun permit to own a firearm in the state. The argument for free access to guns is to counter the idea; that if guns are prohibited, only the “bad guys” will have them. The negative aspect of more widespread firearms possession includes more accidental shootings and lethal conflicts.

Job Loss and Financial Disparity from COVID-19

COVID-19 caused an overwhelming amount of job loss which forced the world into a recession. When the United States falls into a recession, people lose their jobs; and investments diminish in value. Without a steady source of income people can become depressed (Kawohl, 2020). According to Classen and Dunn (2012), individuals who lose their jobs are at a higher risk of suicide. The stimulus checks issued did little to remove the financial strain on individuals with families. According to Boman IV and Gallupe (2020), a lack of money naturally increases criminal activity. These trends are seen during natural disasters and global recessions, such as those in 2008 (Boman IV & Gallupe, 2020). In 2017 during Hurricane Harvey, Houston saw an increase in criminal activity. The crime increase during a natural disaster is commonly related to seeking rapid solutions for mounting problems that come later (Downen, 2017). In those circumstance some people may be ready to engage in more risky behaviors to have their needs met.

Domestic Violence/Intimate Partner Violence

Domestic violence is defined as the abuse of power and control on another individual within a family unit (American Psychological Association, 2018). Domestic violence typically takes place between parent and child, uncle, and niece/nephew, etc. Intimate partner violence involves the same abuse of power and control between two intimate individuals (i.e., husband and wife, boyfriend, and girlfriend). According to Piquero et al. (2020), in Dallas in the beginning, months of COVID-19 stay-at-home orders (March and April of 2020), there was little to no difference in domestic violence. However, according to the National Domestic Violence Hotline (NDVH) in Houston, Texas, there was a drastic increase in distress calls (ABC13, 2020). The number of calls were equivalent to Hurricane Katrina, which forced many residents of

Louisiana into Texas with few belongings such as clothes, money, or personal possessions. In January of 2020, there were 1,214 calls; in February, there were 1,104 (down by 9.1%), but after the mid-March stay-at-home orders, the March number increased to 1,272 (up by 15.2%).

According to the Harris County Sheriff's Office, deputies responded to a total of 1,558 reports of domestic violence in March 2020, a 6% increase from February 2020 (pre-lockdown) (Dellinger, 2020).

According to Lyons and Brewer (2021), intimate partner violence is linked to financial and emotional uncertainty. Per news reports, the modal occurrence involves violence against their families (Lyons & Brewer, 2021). The negative gender roles that many "traditional" families adhere to place unjust pressure on men to provide for their families. Adhering to the "traditional family" also means that the male breadwinner may not have the emotional support to sustain him through a negative incident that puts the family well-being at risk (e.g., losing their job). Instead, the man is told to "deal with it" and continue to provide for the family (American Psychological Association, 2018). This negative pressure on a male provider can become so psychologically toxic that if it is not processed in healthy ways it could erupt into violence (American Psychological Association, 2018).

Theory Behind Isolation/Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence

Social-isolation theory and victim-blaming theory offer a framework for understanding domestic/intimate partner violence during the pandemic. Claude Fischer founded social-isolation theory in 1973 (McPherson et al., 2006). Its purpose is to explain the stress individuals endure once the freedom that they have grown accustomed to is suddenly taken away. Humans are naturally social creatures who thrive off daily interactions with other people, such as friends and family (Steger & Kashdan, 2009; Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014; Murray, 2020). COVID-19 forced

many socially oriented individuals to remain indoors and away from daily social interactions. The lack of face-to-face interactions began to take a mental and emotional toll that directly lead to violence for some. According to Harris (1997), isolation directly leads to violence and anger. The social-isolation theory explains negative behavior behind social isolation by addressing the other emotions involved with isolation (Harris, 1997).

There are three main types of isolation: self-isolation, forced isolation, and forced self-isolation. Self-isolation is typically seen in a situation of school-aged children isolating themselves from their peers for personal reasons (Farooq et al., 2020; Pancani et al., 2021; Sorokoumova et al., 2020). These reasons include avoiding stigmatization, racism, and other mental and emotional damaging factors that the child wishes to avoid. Forced isolation is typically seen within American prisons when individuals are removed from the general population and placed inside solitary confinement (Bejamin & Lux, 1975; Sarzala & Piestrzyński, 2016). This is usually in a cell for 23 out of 24 hours a day with limited to no human interactions. Many prisoners have stated that they began to experience psychosis without having anything else to occupy their minds throughout the day. COVID-19 created a paradox known as forced self-isolation (Pancani et al., 2021; Sarzala & Piestrzyński, 2016). The isolation created by COVID-19 was freer than in a prison but may not have felt comfortable to many and the mental effects are yet, unclear.

In 1971, William Ryan founded the victim-blaming theory which was founded to justify a criminal's behavior by blaming the incident on the victim (Kelly et al., 2011; Valor-Segura et al., 2011; Thacker, 2017). Victim-blaming is commonly seen in cases of rape victims. The abuser will blame the victim for wearing a short skirt to justify the abuser's deviant behavior. The same can be said for the actions committed during the pandemic. Individuals (primarily men)

sometimes blamed their partners (primarily women) and children for the violent actions they committed against them (Morin, 2021). For example, a husband might abuse his wife during COVID-19 and blame the fact that she maintained her job while he lost his as an excuse for his erratic conduct. The purpose of victim-blaming is to instill power within the abuser. The result is the equivalent of the victim being victimized twice (Anastasio & Costa, 2004; Mawby & Brown, 1984).

Mental Health/Illness

Reports during the pandemic are that mental health crises in the United States reached all-time highs related to the forced isolation of individuals with pre-existing mental health issues (Druss, 2020; Kavoor, 2020; Shinn & Viron, 2020). Commonly this referred to eating disorders, schizophrenia disorders, anxiety disorders, depression disorders, bipolar disorders, and personality disorders (Brennan et al., 2000; Jorm, 2000; Vinkers et al., 2011). According to Boden et al. (2021) however, the main by-products of the COVID-19 pandemic were trauma and anxiety. Many individuals regularly experienced anxiety due to joblessness, financial strain, and other factors that trigger a fight or flight response. Another symptom is a trauma response that can leave people confused and more willing to act out negatively to regain some semblance of control (Boden et al., 2021). According to Mazza et al. (2020), mental illness directly contributes to intimate partner violence.

Lack of Police Involvement

During the commission of 405 homicides in Texas, other violence increased as well. Financial disparity caused more people to resort to theft and robbery to help make ends meet (Usher et al., 2020; Kristjánsson, 2020; Everytown, 2021). According to Boman IV and Gallupe (2020), the rate of police calls and resolution to the calls decreased in 2020.

Following the George Floyd protests/riots, the community, especially people of color, began to lose faith in police officers in many cities (Dixon & Dundes, 2020; Neyman & Dalsey, 2020; Onwuachi-Willig, 2021). Victims of domestic/intimate partner violence may have avoided calling the police if they perceived that such would not produce results but rather could make a bad situation worse given family financial strain and joblessness. Often, if a woman were to call the police about an intimate partner's domestic abuse, the partner would be forcibly removed, and the incurred legal fees both for the victim and perpetrator would create more financial strain (Piquero et al., 2020). During COVID-19, the family could not afford to lose any income potential.

Further, Houston experienced a reduction in law enforcement responsiveness, thanks to officers being out with COVID or otherwise in quarantine. There was only one coroner's team to work nightly reports of homicide in Houston, the United States' fourth largest city. Added to this, deficits in Houston's justice system personnel led to a lack of prosecutorial and judicial effectiveness, which resulted in many murderers in Houston walking free until charged or until trial. Harris county had a recent court backlog of 148,000 cases and 4,000 violent offenders on bail (Editorial Board, Houston Chronicle, 2021). These issues are often attributed to an insufficient amount of personnel.

Due to COVID-19, there was a wave of joblessness felt by every sector of employment including police officers (Mercedes, 2021). Many officers, especially newly hired police officers, were relieved of their jobs because of a lack of resources to pay them. A lot of the money that was allocated to police departments was used to ensure the safety of seasoned officers while out in the field (Mercedes, 2021). The decrease in police officers could directly contribute to the decrease in police presence for domestic/intimate partner violence calls. The lack of police

presence could also lead to an increase in homicide because police officers cannot patrol the streets as effectively as before because the lack of manpower means a decrease in man hours (Mercedes, 2021).

Method

Research Design

The study data come from a mixed-method approach involving a qualitative content analysis of news reports, mainly from the Houston Chronicle on Houston homicides in 2020 focusing on the months during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions (March to December). A quantitative examination of relationships among variables reflecting the homicide circumstances to ascertain the impact of domestic living arrangements. Included are variables such as the type of murder committed, the weapon, and the demographics of the perpetrator and victim. From 405 homicides in Houston in 2020, the final sample size for detailed analyses was 150 individual news homicide incidents that offered the most details in available print news media (see Tables 1 and 2 for homicide demographics and circumstances).

The research questions were: (1) Who are the victims and perpetrators? (2) How evident was pandemic stress in an outcome of homicide? (3) To what extent does it appear that Houston's criminal justice system contributed to its increased homicide rate during the pandemic? The data were quantitatively analyzed by running descriptive, then linear and binary logistic regression. Qualitatively, the data were examined manually looking for patterns across the incidents.

Data Collection

The newspaper search criteria were as follows: (1) The murder had to occur within one of Houston's five wards. (2) The responding police officers had to be from Harris County (to ensure

that the homicide did occur in Houston). (3) The newspaper article had to include identifiable information related to the homicides (i.e., the location of the murder, etc.).

The information gathered includes the suspected reason behind the homicide, the race, age, and gender of both the victim and the perpetrator, the date of which the crime took place, the time the murder took place, the exact location of the crime, the zip code of the murder location, and the weapon utilized during the commission of the crime.

The suggested reason behind the homicide. The suggested reason behind the murder was deduced from reading the news reports. Etic codes included domestic violence, drugs, robbery, or police involvement as catalysts for the murder.

Race, age, and gender. The researcher looked at the race, age, and gender of both the victim and perpetrator to establish who was more likely to fall victim to homicide. For example, Black males between the ages of 18-28 are more likely to become a victim than their racial and gender counterparts.

Date and time of the murder. The date and time of the murders is vital information to help the researcher determine what time of day most murders occurred. This would offer implications for context and prevention.

The exact location and zip code. The exact location of the crime indicates who was being affected. Each ward in Houston has a distinct racial makeup that, with further research effort, the researcher could speculate about the race of the victim and perpetrator when the information is not provided in the news articles.

Weapon utilized. Texas has long made it easier for its residents to access firearms legally. Noting the weapons used allows us to assess the impact of the flow of lethal weapons in the region on its homicide rate and who is impacted.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

Findings

Regarding research question one, who are the victims and perpetrators? Tables 1 and 2 representing Houston Police Department reports indicate that while 132 of the relationships are yet to be determined, in most of the cases (207) perpetrators and victims were strangers, in 57 cases they were domestically related and in 7 cases they were friends. The friend cases may have included persons living together, thus only 14% of all of the homicides are established as domestic. In most of the cases (224 out of 405) the cause of the conflict was undetermined early after the offense, but 76 have been established as an argument, 23 were over narcotics, and 16 have been determined to be gang related. The researcher located names for 86 of the 150 victims in this study's sample. Of these, 34% had had names of Latin origin as subjectively determined by the researcher and a colleague. In 41 cases, the gender of the perpetrator was unknown (meaning the perpetrator was not determined), but for 91% of the known cases, the offender was male (see Figure 2). The victims were also mostly males. When race was known in the sample, most of the perpetrators were Black (45%), followed by Hispanics (29%) and then Whites (22%) (see Figure 3). The age of the perpetrators in the Houston data indicated that the most lethal age range was 20 to 29 (see Table 2).

Insert Figures 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 about here

Utilizing a linear regression, the researcher determined that the significance of the weapon utilized was dependent on the race of the perpetrator (.022), gender of the perpetrator (0.32), the race of the victim (<.001), and gender of the victim (<.001) as seen in Table 3.

Table 4 demonstrates the significance of the information run as a binary logistic regression. The dependent variable, Cause of Death reflected a binary categorization of 12 individual types of causes that included intimate partner violence, domestic violence (non-intimate partner), unsolved, homicide by stranger, police murder, murder-suicide, robbery, prison murder, accident, reason unknown, drugs, and death by police (a form of suicide) then recoded into two main categories of domestic violence and other. The only significant predictor of cause of death was perpetrator gender.

Figures 4 and 5 are crosstabulations comparing the perpetrator and victims' race and gender. Figure 4 demonstrates that female victims are more likely to be murdered by male perpetrators. According to Begum et al. (2020), young women are more likely to fall victim to men because when domestic violence is reported the claims are either not taken seriously or the women is guilted into taking back her abuser. The cycle of abuse continues until the woman leaves for good or she is murdered (Begum et al., 2020). Figure 5 demonstrates that race is unknown, the victim is more likely to be killed by Black perpetrators. Gun violence was the number one cause of death through the study; therefore, the researcher can infer that gun violence remains prevalent within the Black community, especially among young Black men.

This researcher thought it was strange that in the sample of 150 cases, none of them mentioned potential gang violence. Whenever the news mentioned "Black on Black" violence in previous years, a common assumption was that gangs or drugs were the leading cause. However, even regarding drugs, there was only one reference to a drug overdose resulting in a homicide. It might be possible that gang activity was down if members were staying home as prescribed by local authorities. Since the beginning of COVID-19, there was a noticeable increase in domestic violence based upon the family disturbance calls. For example, the Harris County Sheriff's Office reported 1,214 family disturbance calls from January 2020 to 1,272 in March 2020 (Dellinger, 2020).

Insert Tables 3 and 4 about here

Regarding the second research question of how evident it was that pandemic stress was related to an outcome of homicide; these details were not readily available in the news reports. However, a qualitative examination of the reports indicates that interpersonal domestic relations figure prominently in the sample, with 28 coded as domestic, 12 as intimate partner and 8 as murder- suicide, which represent 51% of the 95 cases in which the circumstances were clear in the 150-homicide sample. Further, it is reasonable to assume that significant stress was present given the low socioeconomic status of the zip codes in which most of the homicides occurred. These were predominantly Black and Hispanic, low-income communities, places where a number of persons held service jobs, and it is therefore likely that someone in the household experienced being terminated or furloughed with COVID-exposure or sickness.

Zip codes were available for 143 of the 150 homicides analyzed in this study. Modal locations reflecting multiple homicides with the highest numbers in this non-random sample occurred for: 77090 (6) (predominantly African American; median household income \$36,000); 77082 (5) (predominantly White; median household income \$50,000; 77074 (5) (predominantly White; median household income \$36,000), 77063 (5) (predominantly White, median household income \$49,000), 77060 (7) (predominantly White; median household income \$28,000); 77021 (5) (predominantly African American; median household income \$31,000). Most of the less frequent, multiple homicide's locations were in largely Black and Hispanic areas of Houston. These areas also tend to be densely populated with many rental properties.

The fact that predominantly White areas appear as modal areas in this sample reflects the sampling technique of choosing cases with the most details, as homicides involving Whites had more details in the newsprint media than those involving Blacks and Hispanics. Indeed, this trend was pronounced in that it appeared the media tended to underreport vital information in cases with minority race victims. For example, when the victim was White, the articles mentioned details about how the individual was murdered, where the murder occurred, and other important information. The articles also mentioned their life achievements and the family they were leaving behind from the tragedy. While not all of the articles were this way, the majority were, thus requiring extra research beyond print media to put a name and a face to these victims. The lack of details when Blacks and Hispanics are killed in Houston seems to dehumanize these victims, suggesting that their lives and their families matter less than Whites. Granted, the lack of details is not solely the fault of the press, but on the lack of provision of these details by law enforcement to reporters on the scene of these homicides (Gibson, 2021).

Regarding research question three: To what extent does it appear that Houston's criminal justice system contributed to its increased homicide rate during the pandemic?

Most of the homicides occurred late at night or the pre-dawn hours. Details on the summer homicides were scarce, possibly because in the summer of George Floyd and an election season, other items dominated the news. Overall, most of the homicides with enough details to be in the sample occurred in early May (14%) before the murder of George Floyd; 13% occurred in December, followed by 11% in both August and October. These times correlate to periods of increased local movements of persons and some socialization as persons may have had some amount of pandemic or social-distancing fatigue. Spikes in infections and persons needing to quarantine likely affected law enforcement effectiveness, although the police chief claimed that it did not. An ABC News report, on June 30, 2020, indicated that at one point in June, HPD had 207 officers in quarantine. Moreover, there was a local effort to reduce the jail population to reduce the risk of COVID spread by letting non-violent offenders out, but these were often followed by legislation blocking these releases. An unintended effect, however, was that courts seemed to avoid sending persons to jail, even those accused of severe violence or homicide, to not add to the incarcerated population (Crime and Justice Institute, 2021). From 2013 to 2020, there were 231 people in Houston who were killed by persons out on bond (Hensley & Ketterer, 2021). The Texas justice system does not conduct danger assessments or flight risk assessments on the individuals released from jail pending trial.

Conclusion

Domestic violence is traumatic, but violence often does not end with physical, mental, or sexual assault. Sometimes the result is death, especially when there are outside stressors that exasperate the problem like COVID-19 did. In this study, I examined Houston homicides to

deduce who is more likely to fall victim and who was more likely to commit murder. The stress of COVID-19 self-isolation, joblessness, and the lack of social support likely led to an increase in overall homicides in Houston during the first year of coronavirus.

There were notable limitations with this study. The primary one was missing details given that the incidents were being analyzed shortly after they occurred, and before certain facts could not be ascertained. Nevertheless, the approach with this study was to assess news reports, largely from local print media to see the data through a similar lens as they are presented to the public. The missing details limited the amount of quantitative analyses that could be performed. A correlation could not be made of the main causation for the increase in homicides in Houston, TX in 2020, but there was a significant increase during the pandemic lockdowns. Finally, although the media are not always made aware of the suggested cause of death at the time the news article is published, the amount of undetermined homicides provides a significant limitation (224 out of 405). Based on details of the family and descriptions provided by the media, the author made educated conclusions on the race of the participants. In many cases, the gender was also not provided, and the author had to utilize other sources such as obituary sections of other news outlets to locate vital information to better enrich the data.

In Texas, the proliferation of guns is deemed a public health crisis by some. Guns being readily accessible by anyone considered "of age" without taking a gun safety course or getting a concealed handgun license is dangerous. Additionally, a perilous criminal justice system, specifically the bail system, which operates without a meaningful assessment of suspect risk puts Texans lives at risk. Legislatively, Texas needs empirically informed laws and policies on guns and the use of bail. Houston should be better prepared to respond to the next pandemic-like disaster. On a micro level, neighbors need to be each other's keeper to the extent possible so that

persons can assist women and children who find themselves in unsafe home situations. Further, the media and law enforcement would serve the city better if in responding and reporting they made it clear that Black and Brown lives really do matter by reporting on those incidents with the level of attention and care that is given when White families are involved. If state actors get to know the diversity of persons in the city, they should come to realize “that those people” actually do not “live like that” (prone to killing each other) but are the products of systemic structural circumstances.

In conclusion, the research presented aligns with previous research on how contextual ills and challenges may contribute to more crime. In the coming years, researchers will be able to advance theories regarding the impact of forced isolation during COVID-19, and the long-term effect on children who endured these pandemic times. The exposure to death and violence remains to be seen.

References

- Gruber, J., Prinstein, M. J., Clark, L. A., Rottenberg, J., Abramowitz, J. S., Albano, A. M., . . . Weinstock, L. M. (2021). Mental health and clinical psychological science in the time of COVID-19: Challenges, opportunities, and a call to action. *American Psychologist*, 409-426.
- Harris, J. (1997). *Surviving Ethnography: Coping with Isolation, Violence, and Anger*. The Qualitative Report, 1-13.
- Hensley, N. (2020, December 29). Houston reaches grim milestone with 400th murder of 2020. Retrieved from Houston Chronicle: <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/crime/article/Houston-sees-400th-murder-of-2020-15832986.php>
- Hensley, N. & Ketterer, S. (2021). As killings tied to defendants out on bond rise in Houston, crime data reveals a crisis in courts. *Houston Chronicle* July 9, 2021.
- Houston Chronicle, (September 23, 2021). Murder rate climbed at record pace in '20. *Houston Chronicle*, p.4.
- Jorm, A. F. (2000). Mental Health Literacy: Public Knowledge and Beliefs about Mental Disorders. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 396-401.
- Jorss, M. (2021, June 16). Families Will Soon Receive Monthly Child Tax Credit Benefits. Here's What You Need to Know. . Retrieved from NoKidHungry.org: <https://www.nokidhungry.org/blog/families-will-soon-receive-monthly-child-tax-credit-benefits-heres-what-you-need-know>
- Kavoor, A. R. (2020). COVID-19 in People with Mental Illness: Challenges and Vulnerabilities. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, doi: 10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102051.

- Kawohl, W. (2020). COVID-19, unemployment, and suicide. *The Lancet*, 389-390.
- Kelly, U. A., Gonzalez-Guarda, R. M., & Taylor, J. (2011). Theories of Intimate Partner Violence. In J. Humphreys, & J. C. Campbell, *Family Violence and Nursing Practice Second Edition* (pp. 51-89). New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- Kirkham, E. (2021). A Breakdown of the Cost of Raising a Child. Retrieved from Plutus Foundation: <https://plutusfoundation.org/2021/a-breakdown-of-the-cost-of-raising-a-child/>
- Kristjánsson, G. (2020, November 10). Financial Crime During COVID-19: AML Fines on the Rise. Retrieved from Corporate Compliance Insights: <https://www.corporatecomplianceinsights.com/financial-crime-covid-19-aml-fines/>
- Lyons, M., & Brewer, G. (2021). Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence during Lockdown and the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Family Violence*, 1-9.
- Mallozi, V. M. (2021, March 24). Divorce Rates Are Now Dropping. Here Are Some Reasons Why. Retrieved from The New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/24/style/divorce-rates-dropping.html>
- Manning, W. D., & Payne, K. K. (2021). Marriage and Divorce Decline during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Five States . *SAGE Journals*.
- Martin, F. (2020, November 19). Study: Houston's Police Oversight Board Among Least Effective In Texas. Retrieved from Houston Public Media: <https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/articles/news/2020/11/19/386422/study-houstons-police-oversight-board-among-least-effective-in-texas/>
- Mawby, R. L., & Brown, J. (1984). Newspaper images of the victim: A British Study. *Victimology*, 82-94.

- Mazza, M., Marano, G., Lai, C., Janiri, L., & Sani, G. (2020). Danger in danger: Interpersonal violence during COVID-19 quarantine. *Psychiatry Research*.
- McIntyre, D. A. (2021, February 10). Guns in America: Nearly 40 million guns were purchased legally in 2020 and another 4.1 million bought in January. Retrieved from USA Today: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2021/02/10/this-is-how-many-guns-were-sold-in-all-50-states/43371461/>
- McPherson, M., Smith-Lovin, L., & Brashears, M. E. (2006). Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks over Two Decades. *American Sociological Review*, 353-375.
- Mercedes, C. (2021, March 30). TWC: Suspicious unemployment claims during pandemic 'beyond anything we've ever seen before'. Retrieved from KHOU 11: <https://www.khou.com/article/news/investigations/twc-suspicious-unemployment-claims-during-pandemic/285-602eb504-7133-4f8d-a926-316f8db5b401>
- Morin, A. (2021, March 27). What Is Victim Blaming During COVID-19? Retrieved from VeryWellMind: <https://www.verywellmind.com/victim-blaming-during-covid-4843796>
- Murray, K. (2020, March 22). The Effects of Isolation: why some people suffer while others thrive due to Social Distancing. Retrieved from Eastside Online: <https://eastside-online.org/showcase/the-effects-of-isolation-why-some-people-suffer-while-others-thrive-due-to-social-distancing/>
- Neyman, G., & Dalsey, W. (2020). Black Lives Matter protests and COVID-19 cases: relationship in two databases. *Journal of Public Health*, 225-227.

Nieves, R., & Waldrop, T. (2021, June 4). America is on a gun-buying spree. Here's what is driving the surge. Retrieved from CNN: <https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/04/us/us-gun-sales-surge/index.html>

Onwuachi-Willig, A. (2021). The Trauma of Awakening to Racism: Did the Tragic Killing of George Floyd Result in Cultural Trauma for Whites? *Houston Law Review*, 1-23.

Ortegon, A. & Proctor, C. (2020, April). Calls spiked-then dropped. Domestic abuse survivors, at home with abusers during the pandemic, may be unable to get help. *Texas Tribune* April 24, n.p.. Retrieved from <https://www.texastribune.org/2020/04/24/texas-coronavirus-domestic-abuse/>

Pancani, L., Marinucci, M., Aureli, N., & Riva, P. (2021). Forced Social Isolation and Mental Health: A Study on 1,006 Italians Under COVID-19 Lockdown. *Personality and Social Psychology*, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.663799>.

Philippe, R. A., Schiavio, A., & Biasutti, M. (2020). Adaptation and destabilization of interpersonal relationships in sport and music during the Covid-19 lockdown. *Heliyon*, 1-6.

Piquero, A. R., Riddell, J. R., Bishopp, S. A., Narvey, C., Reid, J. A., & Piquero, N. L. (2020). Staying Home, Staying Safe? A Short-Term Analysis of COVID-19 on Dallas Domestic Violence. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 601-635.

Rodgers, J. L., St. John, C. A., & Coleman, R. (2005). Did Fertility Go Up After the Oklahoma City Bombing? An Analysis of Births in Metropolitan Counties in Oklahoma, 1990-1999. *Demography*, 675-692.

- Sandstorm, G. M., & Dunn, E. W. (2014). Is Efficiency Overrated?: Minimal Social Interactions Lead to Belonging and Positive Affect. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 437-442.
- Sarzala, D., & Piestrzyński, W. (2016). Isolation of prison as a situation of deprivation . In *Fundamental and Applied Studies in Eu and CIS Countries* (pp. 368-379). United Kingdom, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Sell, M. (2020, August 6). 'We are their safe place.' When schools closed, child abuse reporting dropped. Retrieved from WBRC.com: <https://www.wbrc.com/2020/08/06/we-are-their-safe-place-when-schools-closed-child-abuse-reporting-dropped/>
- Shinn, A. K., & Viron, M. (2020). Perspectives on the COVID-19 Pandemic and Individuals With Serious Mental Illness. *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*.
- Sorokoumova, E. A., Matveeva, N. E., Cherdymova, E. I., Puchkova, E. B., Temnova, L. V., Chernyshova, E. L., & Ivanov, D. V. (2020). Features of communication between spouses during long-term forced self-isolation as a factor of constructive marital relationships. *EurAsian Journal of BioSciences*, 3863-3868.
- Sparber, S. (2021, June 16). Texans can carry handguns without a license or training starting Sept. 1, after Gov. Greg Abbott signs permitless carry bill into law. Retrieved from The Texas Tribune: <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/06/16/texas-constitutional-carry-greg-abbott/>
- Steger, M. F., & Kashdan, T. B. (2009). Depression and Everyday Social Activity, Belonging, and Well-Being. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 289-300.
- Thacker, L. K. (2017). Rape Culture, Victim Blaming, and the Role of Media in the Criminal Justice System. *Kentucky Journal of Undergraduate Scholarship*, 89-99.

- Uniform Crime Report (2021). Uniform crime reporting handbook for 2020: UCR . Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation
- Usher, K., Bhullar, N., Durkin, J., Gyamfi, N., & Jackson, D. (2020). Family Violence and COVID-19: Increased vulnerability and reduced options for support. *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing*, 549-552.
- Valor-Segura, I., Expósito, F., & Moya, M. (2011). Victim Blaming and Exoneration of the Perpetrator in Domestic Violence: The Role of Beliefs in a Just World and Ambivalent Sexism. *The Spanish Journal of Psychology*, 195-206.
- Vinkers, D. J., de Beurs, E., Barendregt, M., Rinne, T., & Hoek, H. W. (2011). The relationship between mental disorders and different types of crime. *Criminal Behavior and Mental Health*, 307-320.
- Wang, W. (2020, November 10). The U.S. Divorce Rate Has Hit a 50-Year Low . Retrieved from Institute of Family Studies: <https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-us-divorce-rate-has-hit-a-50-year-low>
- Wedding, P. (2021, September 22). Crime, I-45 highlighted state of county speech. *Houston Chronicle* p. A.2

Table 1*Victim Circumstances Homicides in Houston in 2020 (N=405)*

Dispute		Victim's Relation to Offender		Weapon
Undetermined	224	Stranger 213	Firearm	314
Other Argument	76	Unknown 132	Handgun	36
Other	45	Acquaintance 23	Rifle	5
Narcotics	23	Girlfriend 15	Knives/ cutting item	21
Gangs	16	Friend 7	Other	14
Motor Vehicle Theft	12	Mother 4	Person (fist/feet/etc)	10
Larceny	6	Other Family 4	Blunt Object	4
Arson	1	Boyfriend 3	Fire	1
Robbery	1	Brother 2		
		Daughter 2		

Father 2

Step-father 2

Source: Uniform Crime Reports for 2020 (2021): Washington D.C.: Federal Bureau of Investigations. Retrieved from <https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/ucr/publications>

Table 2*Homicide Offenders and Victims with Reported Age Houston 2020*

Age	Offender	Victim Age
Unknown	162	
20-29	155	150
10-19	82	43
30-39	76	99
40-49	29	54
50-59	8	29
60-69	0	19
N=518		N=405

Source: Uniform Crime Reports for 2020 (2021): Washington D.C.: Federal Bureau of Investigations. Retrieved from <https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/ucr/publications>

Table 3*Linear Regression Significance Factors of Murder Weapon*

	Beta	Standard Error	Significance
Weapon		.149	<.001
Perp Race	.187	.047	.022
Perp Gender	.127	.061	.032
Victim Race	.355	.056	<.001
Victim Gender	.235	.043	<.001

Dependent variable: Weapon; $p < .05$; $R^2 = .668$, Sig. = <.001

Table 4*Linear Regression Significance Factors of Murder Weapon*

	Beta	Standard Error	Wald.	Significance
Death Cause	.775	.176	19.316	<.001
Weapon	.183	.126	2.105	.147
Perp Race	-.065	.072	.801	.371
Perp Gender	.248	.110	5.097	.024
Victim Race	-.093	.092	1.022	.312
Victim Gender	.127	.068	3.483	.062

Dependent variable: Death Cause; $p < .05$; Sig. = <.001

Figure 1

Sample of Houston Homicide Circumstances in 2020

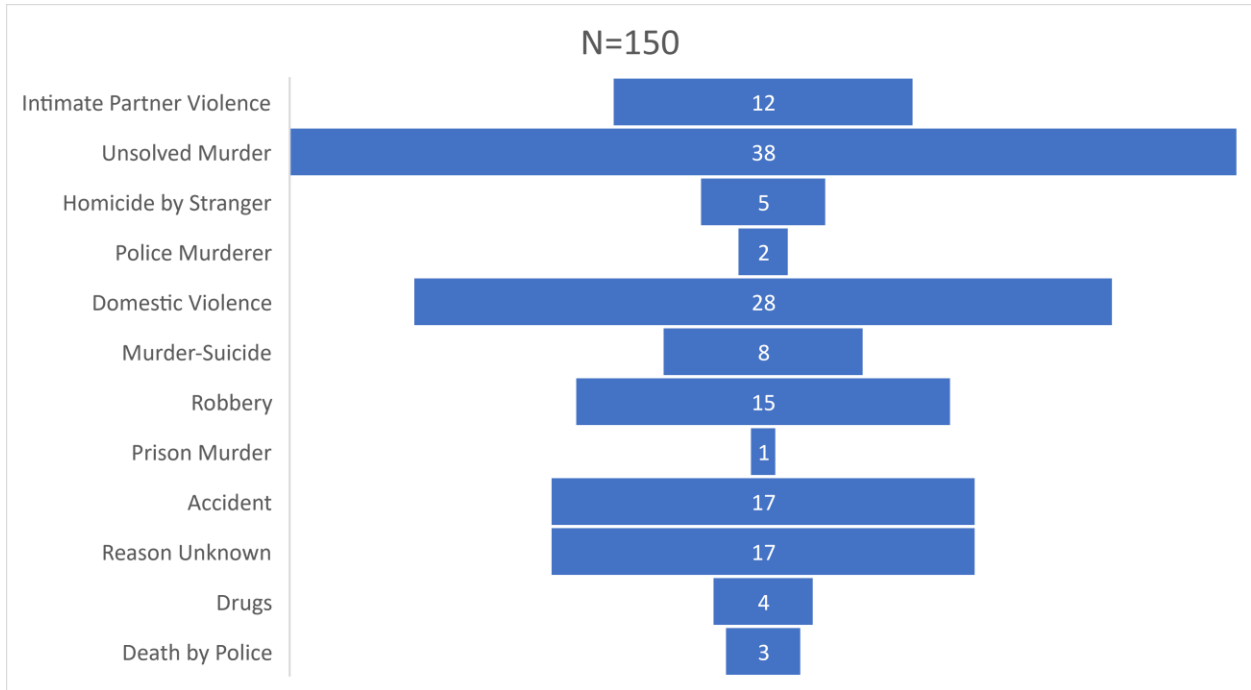


Figure 2

Sample of homicides, Perpetrators by Gender, Houston 2020

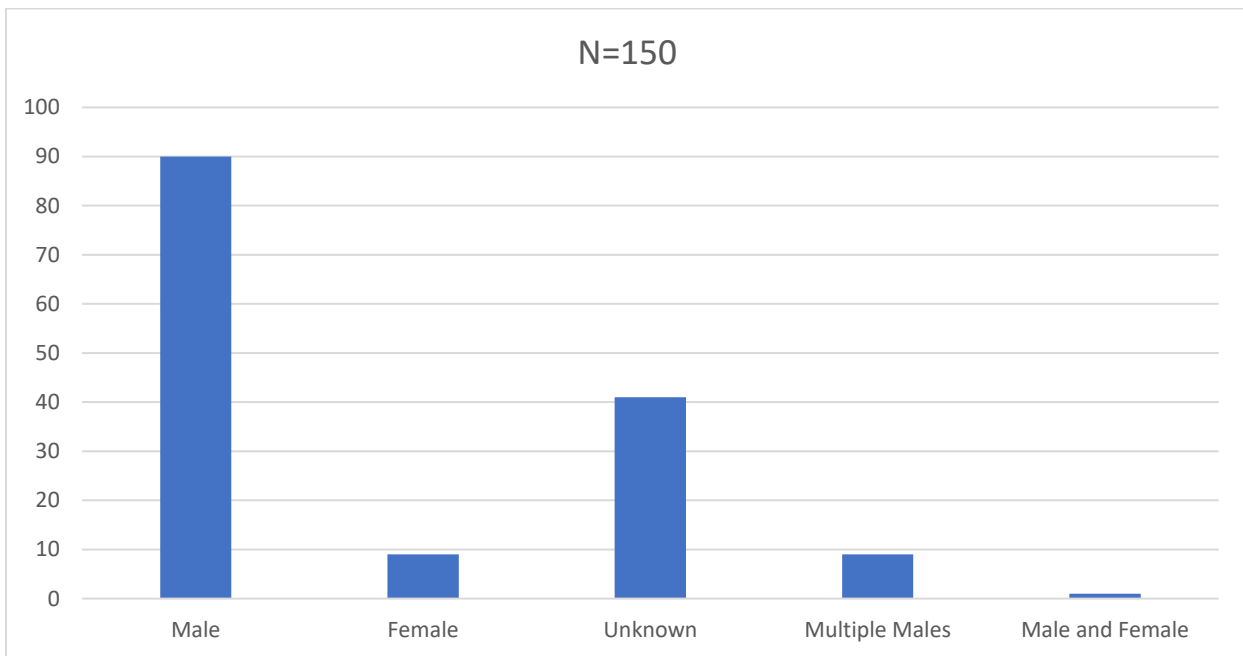


Figure 3

Frequencies Perpetrators' Race/Ethnicity, Houston 2020 Homicide Sample

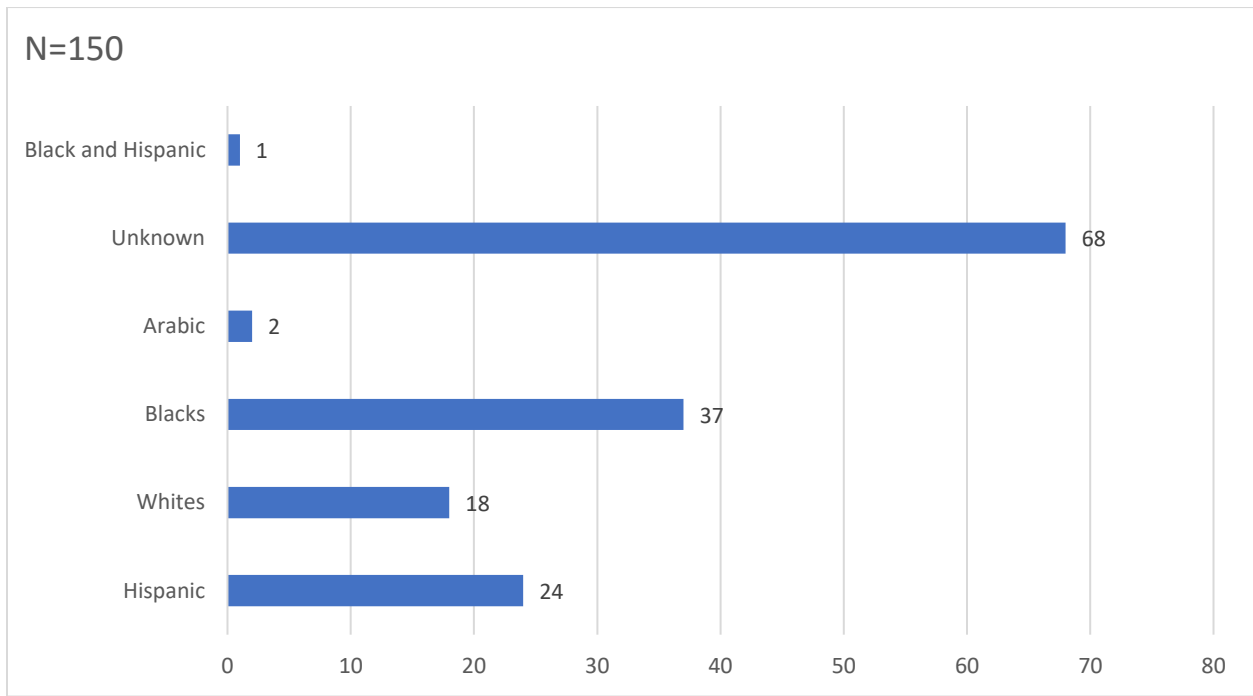


Figure 4

Perpetrator Gender to Victim Gender Crosstabulation

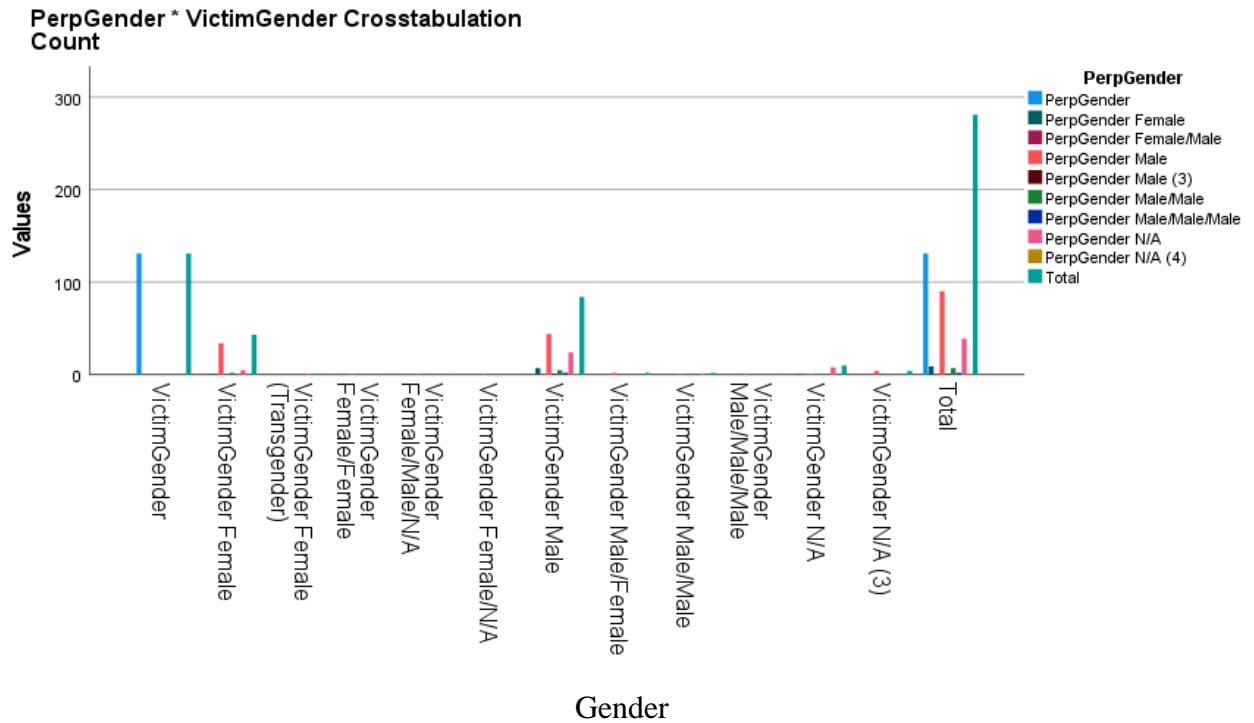


Figure 5

Crosstabulation Perpetrator Race to Victim Race

