

Sexual homicide in Scotland

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Key points

- Sexual homicides in Scotland are distinctly different from non-sexual homicide and appear to share more similarities with cases of non-lethal sexual violence
- Female offenders of sexual violence show distinct differences in profile from both female non-sexual homicide offenders and male sexual homicide offenders
- Certain types of sexual homicide offenders can be identified based on case characteristics and these are comparable in Scotland and Canada
- Both the nature of the homicide (i.e. sexual versus non-sexual) and the gender of the offender are important variables to consider when designing and implementing intervention programmes
- Sexual homicides constitute the extreme end of a sexual violence spectrum and require specific, targeted preventative initiatives particularly focused around the issues of gender inequality

Introduction

According to the most recent recorded crime statistics (Scottish Government, 2017), non-sexual crimes of violence have declined by 44% in Scotland since 2007/08. This reflects significant reductions in homicide, attempted murder and serious assault, robbery and other violence. Conversely, sexual crimes have been on a long upward trend since 1974. Indeed, recorded sexual violence (rape, attempted rape and sexual assault) has increased by 135% over the past ten years alone.

The increase in sexual crimes has been largely put down to greater willingness of victims to report to the police (especially in light of high-profile historic child sexual abuse cases) and better recording practices by the police. Although the implementation of the Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2009 also caused some increase in recorded figures, especially with regards to taking and sharing of indecent images and widening the definition of rape.

Despite the dramatic increase in sexual crimes in Scotland, there has been



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very little research in this area and sexual homicide has received no attention at all. Drawing on a wider programme of AQMeN research on homicide in Scotland, this briefing paper summarises the findings of three studies of sexual homicide. The aim of these studies was to examine differences between sexual and non-sexual homicide cases and offenders, with a view to identifying any implications for policy and practice.

Data and methods

Two data sources were used for the three studies: a Scottish sample (used in all three

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studies) and a Canadian sample (used in Study 3 only). The Scottish data came from the Scottish Homicide Database and included all sexual homicide cases committed in Scotland between 1990 and 2015. A case was considered to be sexual in nature if it met the definition of sexual homicide provided by the FBI: i.e. it included at least one of the following:

- victim's attire or lack of attire
- exposure of the sexual parts of the victim's body
- sexual positioning of the victim's body
- insertion of foreign objects into the victim's body cavities evidence of sexual intercourse
- evidence of substitute sexual activity, interest or sadistic fantasy (Ressler et al., 1988)

The Scottish sample consisted of 85 sexual homicide cases involving 97 offenders (eight of whom were female).

The Canadian dataset came from a national database operated by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and consisted of 150 sexual homicide cases, with every case including one offender, committed between 1990 and 2010. All the sexual homicide offenders in the Canadian sample were male.

Study 1: Comparing male sexual homicide offenders to non-sexual homicide offenders in Scotland

The aim of the first study was to examine whether sexual homicide offenders differed from non-sexual homicide offenders in Scotland. Previous studies have compared offenders involved in sexual homicides with those involved in non-lethal sexual offenses and found them to be quite similar (Proulx et al, 2007). However, few studies have examined whether offenders who commit sexual homicide are similar to those who commit non-sexual homicide. This study aimed to fill this gap.

Scottish male sexual and non-sexual homicide offenders were compared using bivariate analysis and regression. The findings revealed that sexual homicide offenders were significantly more likely to kill their victims using strangulation or asphyxiation (although this difference disappeared in the regression model when other factors were controlled for). Sexual homicide offenders were also more than six times as likely to attack a stranger, and were almost three times as likely to destroy evidence of the crime. Overall, it was concluded that the modus operandi of male sexual homicide offenders could be considered distinctly different to that of non-sexual homicide offenders, particularly in terms of the victim identity and attempts

to conceal the crime. These differences could have important implications for intervention and rehabilitation programmes for homicide offenders.

Study 2: Female sexual homicide offenders in Scotland

The second study aimed to examine the characteristics of sexual homicides committed by female offenders in Scotland. Research on female homicide offenders has been virtually non-existent and there are no studies outside of North America. This study aimed to broaden the research base and add a new European perspective. The characteristics of eight sexual homicide cases involving a female offender (FSH) between 1990 and 2015 were compared with two comparison groups; 106 female non-sexual homicide offenders (FNSH) and 89 male sexual homicide offenders (MSH). Due to the small number of offenders in this study, only bivariate analysis was conducted.

Analysis found that FSH offenders were similar to both FNSH and MSH offenders in some respects; however, there were also important differences between these groups. For instance, FSH offenders were significantly more likely than FNSH offenders to kill a female victim; however, this made them very similar to MSH offenders. On the other hand, FSH offenders were significantly more likely than MSH offenders to have an accomplice, but they shared this characteristic with FNSH offenders. Furthermore, FSH cases were more likely to have occurred indoors compared to both FNSH and MSH cases.

The number of female sexual offenders in this study was very small, so it is important to interpret these findings with caution. However, they provide some evidence to suggest, much in line with previous North American research, that sexual homicides committed by female offenders may be distinctly different to other types of homicide. This study should encourage further research on the gendered dimension of homicide and whether different models of investigation and intervention need to be developed.

Study 3: Consistency of sexual homicide subtypes across countries

The third study used both the Scottish and the Canadian datasets. The study aimed to

- compare male sexual homicide cases in Scotland with those in Canada in order to examine jurisdictional similarities and differences

- to examine whether any meaningful subtypes of sexual homicide events could be identified in each sample using a statistical technique called Latent Class Analysis (LCA)

LCA is a probabilistic clustering technique designed to identify latent subgroups in data based on case characteristics and has been used previously to identify subtypes of sexual homicide (Balemba et al., 2014).

Bivariate analysis showed that the Scottish and Canadian samples differed on a number of important variables. In particular, Canadian sexual homicide cases were more likely than those in the Scottish sample to involve a victim who was employed and to have involved family members and people who knew each other well. In addition, the Canadian cases were more likely than Scottish cases to involve the use of a firearm or physical assault in the mode of killing, to have taken place at multiple locations and to have involved destruction of evidence.

Despite these differences in the profile of cases, the subtypes of sexual homicide revealed using LCA were remarkably similar for both countries. Two equally sized subtypes of sexual homicide were identified in both samples which reflected similar underlying patterns in the data. The first subtype identified was labelled Controlled-Organised Sexual Homicide. These cases were highly organised and premeditated, and involved characteristics such as bringing the weapon to the scene and using multiple locations. These homicides also included a higher probability of targeting prostitutes and strangers. The second type identified in both samples was labelled Diverse Sexual Homicides due to the diverse method of killing. The Diverse Sexual Homicides were most commonly committed by someone known to the victim, like a friend or a family member, and the homicides were more likely to include improvised elements.

The findings suggested that although differences appear at the bivariate level, this does not exclude the possibility of underlying similarities in the pattern of offending. The Controlled-Organized Sexual Homicides were very similar across samples, which would suggest that some elements of sexual homicide are universal. The Diverse Sexual Homicides also displayed similarities across samples but seemed to be more dependent on context. Given that research in sexual homicide is often hampered by a low number of cases, more research about the universal underlying aspects of sexual homicide should be conducted in order to examine the possibility of combining samples across countries.

Conclusions and implications

These three studies on sexual homicide are the first of their kind in Scotland and have provided useful insights to this rare but under-researched crime. This research has confirmed the findings of previous studies that male sexual homicide offenders are distinctly different to non-sexual homicide offenders. However, it has provided new evidence to suggest that female sexual offenders are distinctively different from both female non-sexual offenders and male sexual offenders. This clearly suggests that both the nature of the homicide (i.e. sexual versus non-sexual) and the gender of the offender are important variables to consider when designing and implementing intervention programmes. In addition, this study has found clear differences in the characteristics of sexual homicides committed in Scotland and Canada. Nevertheless, when studying subtypes of homicide, both jurisdictions tend to have one group of Controlled-organised Sexual Homicides which appear to be highly ordered, planned and pre-meditated; and another sub-type of Diverse homicides which show less similarity in terms of their characteristics. Thus, there are elements of the organisation of sexual homicide cases that appear to be universal, even though the specific nature of cases probably varies according to context.

These findings also have implications for the treatment of sexual homicide offenders. As the current studies have shown, sexual homicide offenders are different from non-sexual homicide offenders. Since previous research also has shown that sexual homicide offenders tend to be more similar to non-lethal sexual offenders (Proulx et al., 2007), it would be beneficial to treat these offenders as escalating sexual offenders rather than homicide offenders. Sexual offender management strategies might not always be available for homicide offenders and treatment programs as well as custodial strategies should therefore be examined further in the light of the current findings.

These findings also have implications for the Scottish context specifically. Overall, these findings suggest that sexual homicide offenders constitute a distinct group of offenders that may have specific needs and therefore might require specific types of support in order to prevent future offending. If sexual homicide offenders are better understood as escalating sexual offenders, there is a need for understanding the mechanisms behind this escalation in order to prevent this crime. Although rare, sexual homicide constitutes



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the extreme end of a spectrum of sexual offences, rooted in cultural and societal issues of gender inequality (Scottish Government, 2016a). It is therefore vital that future prevention strategies aimed to reduce any kind of sexual violence take these issues into account and provide a framework for how to change these attitudes, particularly among young people. Although sexual homicide lies at the extreme end of the spectrum, these findings demonstrate that sexual offences overall need to be tackled specifically, especially in the light of recent increases of this crime in Scotland.

References

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Biographies

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