

NCJRS

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BATTERED WOMEN - THE LAST RESORT

ACQUISITIONS

HYPOTHESIS

In 1973, I became the Superintendent of the Women's Division of the Cook County Department of Corrections, commonly called Division III, in Chicago, Illinois. It was the first time in Cook County's history that a female had ever held that post. It was also the first time that all women prisoners would be housed in the same building, and the first time two staffs would work together under one roof.

The building is a modern 5.2 Million Dollar centrally air-conditioned facility, the first of its kind with no bars.

Adjusting to the new facility was difficult, not just for the female prisoners, but the correctional officers as well.

Shortly after the building was occupied, and programs were developed and implemented, I began to notice something that at first appeared unusual - there seemed to be a lot of women being arrested for murder.

Being new in the field of adult corrections, I began attempting to find out why so many women were committing murder. I talked with Winston E. Moore, Executive Director at this time, who gave me some insight into the problem and insisted that I find printed literature on the subject. As I searched for some answers to this puzzling phenomenon, it became increasingly apparent that very few people had ever been interested enough

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to see why women were committing murder. I then felt compelled to satisfy my own curiosity, and with Mr. Moore's encouragement, I started a preliminary investigation.

I randomly interviewed women I knew were arrested for murder at the beginning of 1974 and 1975. Of the women who had killed their husbands, common-law husbands and/or boyfriends, the dominant reason these women gave for slaying their loved ones was continuous abuse.

METHODOLOGY

At the middle of 1975 and all of 1976, I decided to see whether my cursory interviews could be validated. I decided that every woman arrested for murder, involuntary manslaughter, and manslaughter would be interviewed. I designed a questionnaire for myself which included:

- 1) The person killed and race
- 2) The weapon used
- 3) Length of marriage or relationship
- 4) Reasons for beatings
- 5) Preventative measures utilized prior to the murder
- 6) Reasons for remaining

Other information I felt would be useful once the data collected was analyzed could be obtained from the history card. Information included:

- 1) Number of children
- 2) Ages of children
- 3) Ages of women

- 4) Birthplaces of women
- 5) Length of time in Cook County
- 6) Educational background
- 7) Employment history

From my cursory interviews, most of the women arrested had no prior criminal records. In order to determine whether this was unusual or indeed the norm, arrest records would be used.

In the city of Chicago, the arrest sheet is attached to the committment paper. If there is no I.R. number (Identification-Fingerprint number) the ~~subject~~^{PERSON} is a first offender. Due to the fact that we service the entire county, the Police Departments in surburban Cook County do not utilize the same arrest sheets as Chicago. The History Card was the only way to secure previous arrest records.

DATA

Due to the fact that many states sanction common-law marriages, some categories in this study will incorporate them both. Boyfriends will remain separated.

132 women were arrested for murder, manslaughter or involuntary manslaughter. Of the 132 arrested, 53 had either killed their husbands, common-law husbands and/or boyfriends.

THE PERSON KILLED AND RACE

The Racial Breakdown was 46 Black, 6 White and 1 American Indian. Of the 53 women, 23 killed their husbands, 15 killed their common-law husbands and 15 killed their boyfriends.

The 23 women who killed husbands, 19 were black, 3 were white and 1 American Indian. Of the 15 women who killed common-law husbands, 14 were black, and 1 white. The 15 women who killed their boyfriends, 13 were black, 2 were white.

WEAPONS USED

The weapons used for the killings were either knives or guns. Of the 23 women who killed their husbands, 16 were stabbed and 7 were shot. The 15 who killed their common-law husbands, 5 were stabbed, and 10 were shot. The total was 21 shot or 17 stabbed. The 15 women who killed their boyfriends, 10 were stabbed and 5 were shot.

LENGTH OF MARRIAGE

Of the 38 women who killed their husbands and/or common-law husbands, the average length of domicile was 6.3 years. The average length of a continuous relationship with the 15 who killed their boyfriends was 3.7 years. 31 of the women named excessive alcoholism as the reason for the beatings. Of the 31 women, 19 were legally married, 8 were common-law and 4 were boyfriend relationships. The other 22 women had listed several reasons for the beatings; most of them stated that the men were just "mean" and others stated that when they could talk,

the men usually could not give any reason for their abusive-ness, except to advise the women that they "the women" made them angry.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

All 53 women claimed to have called the police on numerous occasions. None could give an exact number, but all claimed over five or six times.

REASONS FOR REMAINING

Of the 53 women, 36 said because of the children, the other 17 said fear. All said they loved the men.

ADDITIONAL DATA

The information from the History Card is general and not in specific categories according to race, married or unmarried, and will reflect the average of all 53 women, except with respect to children. This data is as follow:

1. Number of children

Of the 53 women, 42 had children. All of the married couples had children, except one, and all of the common-law relationships had children except 3. All the other children were products of the slain boyfriends. The average number of children were 2.13.

2. Average Age of children

The average age of the children were 11.5 years old.

3. Average Age of Women

The ages ranged from 22 to 63 years old.

In listing all 53 by age the average was

31.0 years old.

4. Birthplace of Women

Of the 53 women, 17 were born in Chicago,

5 suburban Cook County, 9 Mississippi,

6 Arkansas, 3 Alabama, 2 Tennessee, 2 Texas,

1 Georgia, 1 Virginia, 1 Louisiana, 1 Kentucky,

1 Oklahoma, 1 Ohio, 1 Michigan, 1 Montana,

and 1 Missouri.

5. Average stay in Cook County

The women not born in Cook County, the average length was 6.7 years.

6. Average Educational Level

The average grade level of the women in compiling all the grade levels completed from the lowest to the highest was 9.7.

7. Employment History

Of the 53 women, 14 of them were employed, and 39 were unemployed housewives.

8. Arrest Records

Of the 53 women, only 2 had prior arrest records from Chicago; the ones residing in suburban Cook County had no previous records.

(It was interesting to note that one of the women with a previous arrest record was arrested for battery. She claimed she pressed charges against her husband and he pressed charges against her). The other arrest was for traffic.

ANALYSIS

In compiling the data, I began to question some of the other findings. From my cursory interviews, from previous years most of the women had killed their husbands with knives. In looking at the data, there was a significant change in the usage of guns. This would lead one to believe that there was a greater availability of guns in 1976, than in 1974 and 1975.

In questioning the women about gun usage, most of them advised that the guns were in the home. Seven of the wives stated that the same gun they used to kill their husbands had been used to "pistol whip" them. All of the women stated that during the altercations which precipitated the killings, all thought of getting to the guns as a means of warding off the attacks. The women who used knives stated that the knives were the only "thing" they could get to at the time.

Alcoholism was the most common problem which caused the beatings. The 31 women who claimed that their husbands and boyfriends became more abusive and that the beatings were more intensified if they had been drinking heavily.

Alcoholism is an extremely complex problem, and would require more intensive investigation. (It might be the kind of information those operating the Centers for Battered Women to investigate).

The other women advised that the men were "mean" and that they "the women" made them angry. In discussing this aspect, it might be of value to question the childhood of the males. Were both parents in the home? Did the parents fight? What kind of mother did he have (aggressive/non-aggressive)?

In reference to the other main reason that the women made them angry, I looked at the average grade-level of the women, one would question whether the women were academically superior to their male counterparts which could have forced the male to exert his physical prowess.

Culturally, in looking at the racial composition in that 46 of the women were black - Black females have traditionally been the heads of the household and the dominant figure in the home since slavery. One should question whether this dominance was a contributing factor in the males lashing out physically to assert his male dominance.

All of the women claimed the police were called on numerous occasions, and 27 claimed that after continuously calling the police and having the men arrested the beatings became more severe after each arrest. All of them stated that after the beatings became more severe, they stopped calling the police.

I questioned what happened to the men if they were arrested. Of the 31 who stipulated that alcoholism was the problem, the police would arrest them, let them sleep it off, and they would return home. Many of the women stated that they felt guilty about leaving their loved ones in jail, and would not press charges. Others said they were afraid to press charges.

After looking at all of the data the one question that still remains unanswered - "Why didn't you leave?" Most of the women said because of their children. Only 42 of the women had children, and the average number of children was only 2.13. When questioning the ones with children, 6 of them who were employed stated that they could not support the children alone. The rest who were unemployed stated that they really had no place to go, and no one who could take them in on a permanent basis. Several of the women had left and were found sooner or later by the mate stated that they decided to return with the children, as most of the loved ones would threaten the people with whom they were living. In that particular instance, the women returned to prevent innocent people from becoming involved, and possibly getting hurt.

Of the women who stated that fear forced them to remain, the accounts of the beatings were similar to those of the women with children except one big difference, many of the women with no children stated that a great deal of the time, the beatings did not always take place in the home.

One case in particular was a classic. Mrs. X stipulated that her husband was arguing with her one Sunday morning, She stated that she was getting ready to go to church, and decided not to say anything to him. She proceeded to dress, left the house and went to church. She stated that she felt safe in church and had begun to relax, listening to the choir's singing, when all of a sudden she heard her name called in back of the church. She stated that she immediately got up to leave to avoid any problems in the church, but as she stepped into the aisle her husband rushed to her and started beating her in the church. Mrs. X stated that she never felt he would ever do a thing like that, and because of her embarrassment, she ceased attending that particular church.

The women claimed beatings occurred at family gatherings, on the streets, at parties, etc. These women stated that not only were they afraid of their loved ones, people they knew, were also afraid of them which left them no recourse but to remain. All of the women, with all of these problems, still stated they loved them.

CONCLUSION

~~40%~~ of the women arrested for murder, voluntary manslaughter or involuntary manslaughter were battered women. All of these women had undergone severe beatings, some were even hospitalized as a result of the beatings. All, however, remained until a murder was committed.

One could question, does this then justify murder? The obvious answer is no. Of the 53 women who killed their loved ones, none had maliciously and with premeditated intent, commit murder. Why after continuous beatings, did these women commit murder? In every instance, the women advised that there was a different look in his eyes, a different expression, and all said that the time the murder occurred, they felt that it was "either him or me". As long as the women felt that they were in no eminent danger of losing their lives, they would still be with their loved ones. I continue to say loved ones, because inspite of all of the beatings, abusive language, embarrassment, etc. all of the women stated that they loved their men.

Some research on battered women reflected that sexual activity occurred after severe beatings. I did not investigate this aspect in this study, but the mere fact that the women continued to remain could support some conclusion of sadomasochism.

Across the country there are Centers for battered women. In Chicago there is no center where battered women can have shelter from their abusive loved ones. If such a shelter had existed, maybe some of the women would have left their loved ones, and receipt of some therapy for both partners, could have begun.

There are some extreme psychological questions which remain unanswered, and I will continue my research to answer some of the questions. I feel that there should be intensive therapy, not just for the women, but for the men also. It does absolutely no good to counsel the women, and the men continue their abusive acts. If such were the case in centers across the country, maybe women would not have resulted to murder.

In reference to the fate of these women, out of the 53, 25 were discharged on bond, 3 went to the Department of Mental Health, 4 were discharged with a finding of not guilty, 4 received Work Release, and the remaining 17 were found guilty with average sentences of 2 to 9 years.

I question how one rehabilitates a person who is not a criminal but who, if services were available could be living productive lives, without guilt and remorse for taking a human life, to save their own.

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