



A CLOSER LOOK: HOMICIDE-SUICIDE INCIDENTS

A COMPARISON OF DEATHS FROM HOMICIDE-SUICIDE INCIDENTS

TO ALL OTHER HOMICIDE AND SUICIDE VICTIMS, MASSACHUSETTS, 2003-2007

While homicide-suicide incidents are rare occurrences, they are particularly violent acts with long-lasting effects on families and communities. In 2007 alone, 14 children were left without a parent as a result of a homicide-suicide incident.* In order to design strategies to prevent these tragic incidents, data must be collected and analyzed. Until recently, there has not been a surveillance system that collected incident-level data which could allow for a better understanding of the problem.

This bulletin presents data collected from the Massachusetts Violent Death Reporting System (MAVDRS). MAVDRS collects data on *incidents*, unlike most other surveillance systems which are person-based. This allows for identification of multiple-person incidents, including homicide-suicide incidents (referred to as “H-S” in this bulletin; and as “murder-suicides” in the media). H-S incidents differ in important ways from homicides or suicides in general and without this system, these differences could be missed. For the purposes of this bulletin, the term H-S incident refers to one or more homicides followed by the suicide of the perpetrator of the homicide(s) when the fatal injuries are inflicted less than 24 hours apart. *The perpetrators of the homicides who then completed suicide are referred to in this report as “perpetrators.”*

Both the homicide victims and perpetrators in these cases differ from other homicide and suicide victims in demographic characteristics such as age, gender, and race/ethnicity. Circumstances surrounding the incident also differ, such as type of weapon used, location of the fatal injury, and the relationship between the homicide victim and perpetrator. This bulletin compares the characteristics of victims in H-S incidents with the characteristics of all other homicides and suicides.

Examples of Homicide-Suicide Incidents

- A man shoots his wife and child and then immediately shoots himself.
- A man stabs his boyfriend and then later that day shoots himself.
- A woman kills her child and herself in the same act.
- A man shoots two acquaintances outside a bar and 12 hours later shoots himself when pulled over by police.
- A man shoots his terminally ill wife and shoots himself after the two had made a pact.

There were a total of 41 homicide-suicide incidents that occurred in Massachusetts between 2003 and 2007. This includes 49 homicides and 41 suicides for a total of 90 deaths.

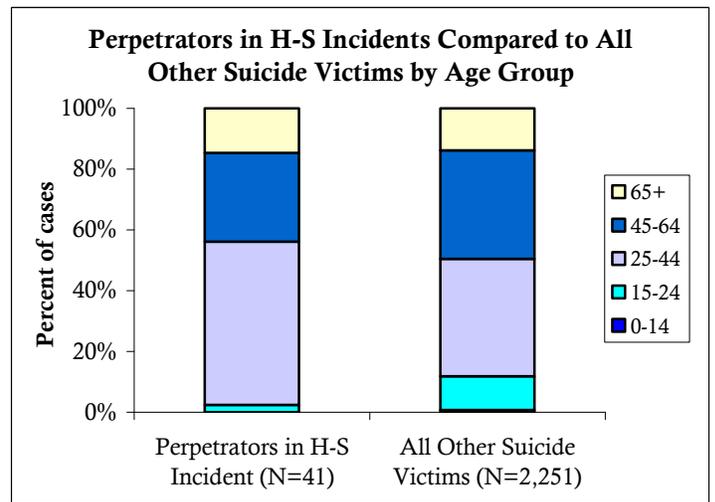
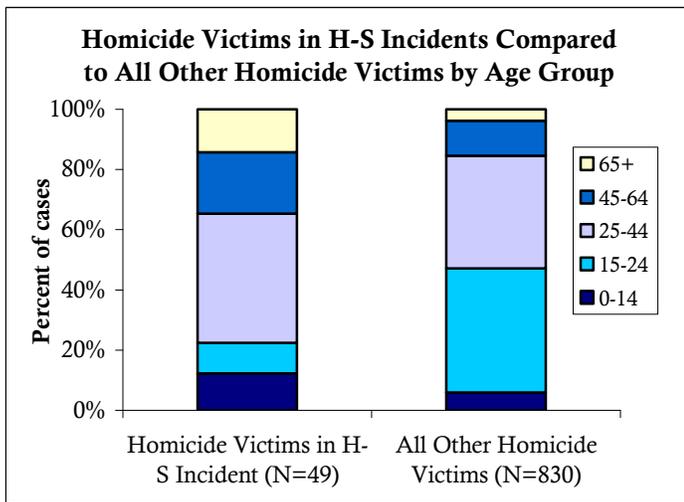
Key Findings

Homicide-suicide incidents are rare occurrences (6% of all homicide victims and 2% of all suicide victims result from H-S incidents). Some general characteristics of these H-S incidents are:

- Intimate Partner Violence-related (IPV)
- Perpetrated by white males
- Involve the use of a firearm
- Most do not involve an intoxicated perpetrator
- On average, homicide victims were female and older than all other homicide victims
- Homicide victims knew their perpetrator

*Jane Doe, Inc: *Domestic Violence Homicides List Narratives, January 1, 2007 – December 31, 2007*; http://www.janedoe.org/know/Narratives%202007%2012_31.pdf; accessed 10/22/2009

AGE GROUP



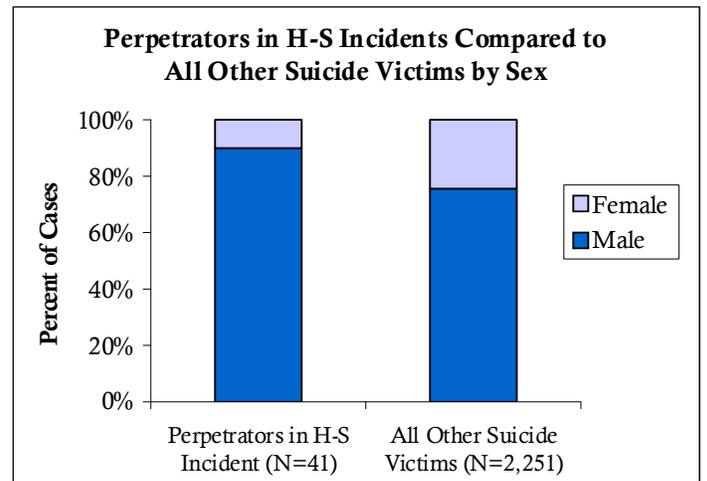
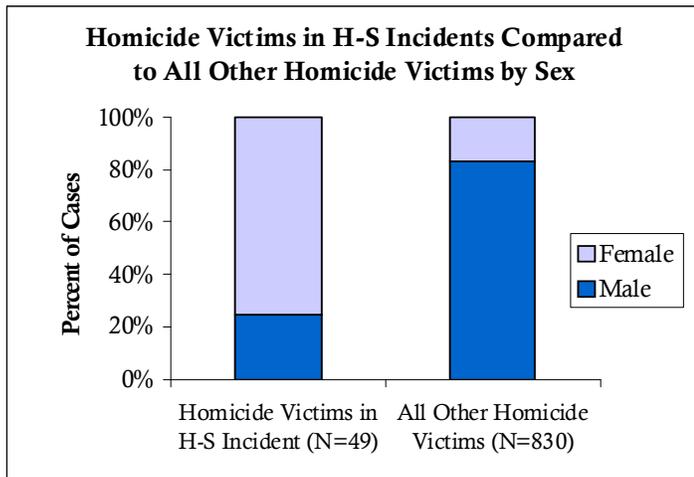
Homicide victims

- On average, homicide victims in H-S incidents were older than all other homicide victims; 78% vs. 53% were 25 years of age or older.
- The average age of homicide victims in a H-S incident was 39 years old. In contrast, the average age for all other homicide victims was 30 years old.
- 15-24 year-olds comprise a much smaller percent (10%) of homicide victims in H-S incidents than in all other homicides (41%).
- 71% of homicide victims in a H-S incident were younger than the perpetrator.

Perpetrators

- Perpetrators in a H-S incident were slightly older than all other suicide victims.
- 54% of the perpetrators in a H-S incident were in the 25-44 age group and 15% were over 65.
- 51% of homicide victims in a H-S incident were within 5 years of age (older or younger) of the perpetrator.

SEX



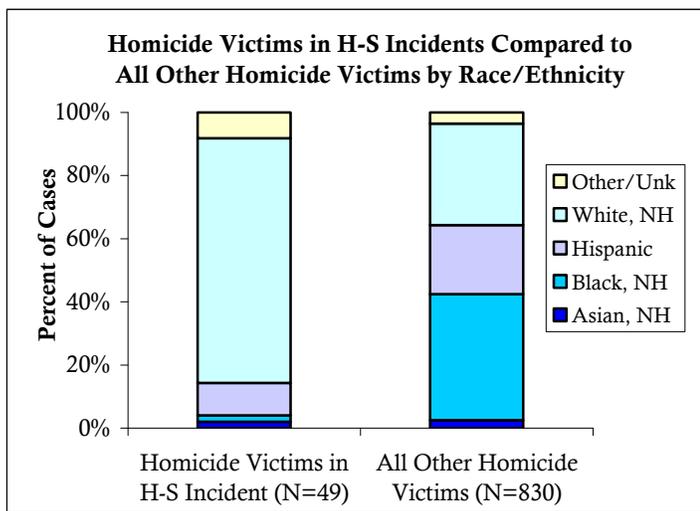
Homicide victims

- In H-S incidents, over ¾ of homicide victims were female (76%) compared to only 17% of all other homicide cases.
- Males were more likely to kill females than males in H-S incidents.

Perpetrators

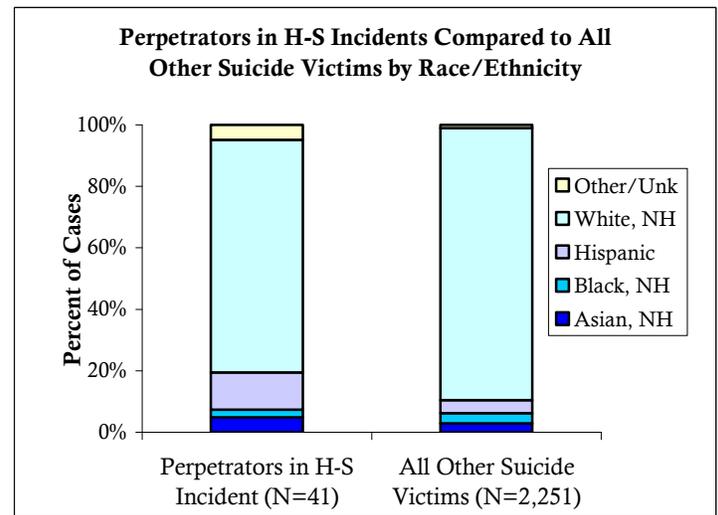
- Males accounted for a larger percentage of the perpetrators in H-S incidents (90%) than in all other suicide cases (75%).

RACE/ETHNICITY



Homicide victims

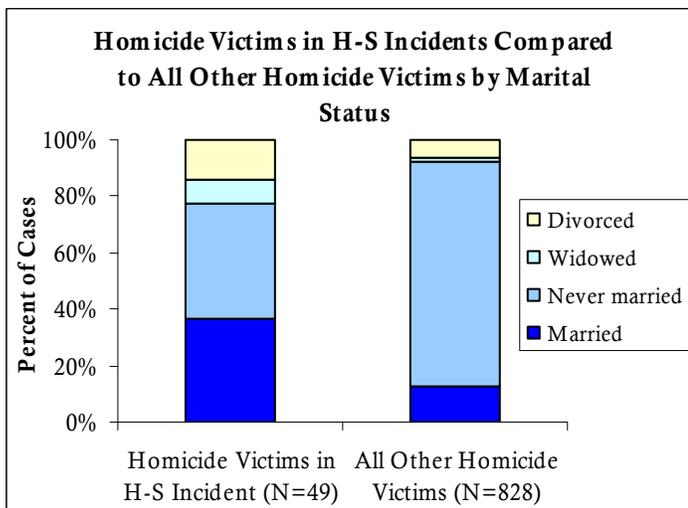
- White, non-Hispanics accounted for a much larger percentage of homicide victims in H-S incidents (78%) than in all other homicide cases (32%).
- 96% of victims were killed by a perpetrator of the same race/ethnicity.



Perpetrators

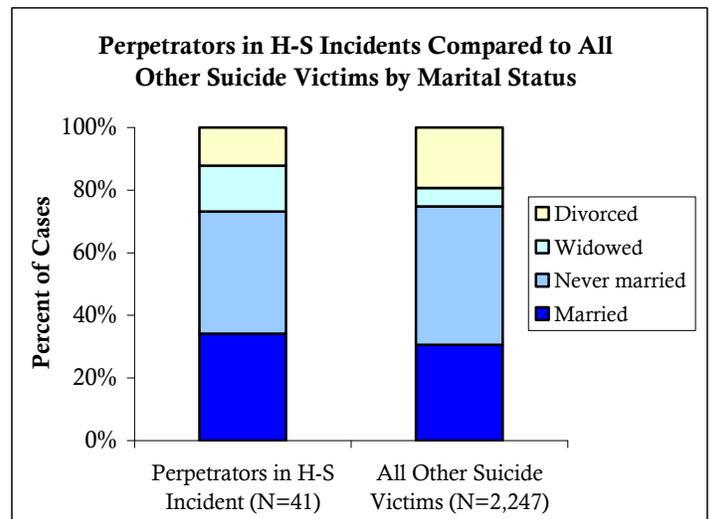
- Perpetrators in H-S incidents were fairly similar in race/ethnicity to all other suicide victims.

MARITAL STATUS



Homicide Victims

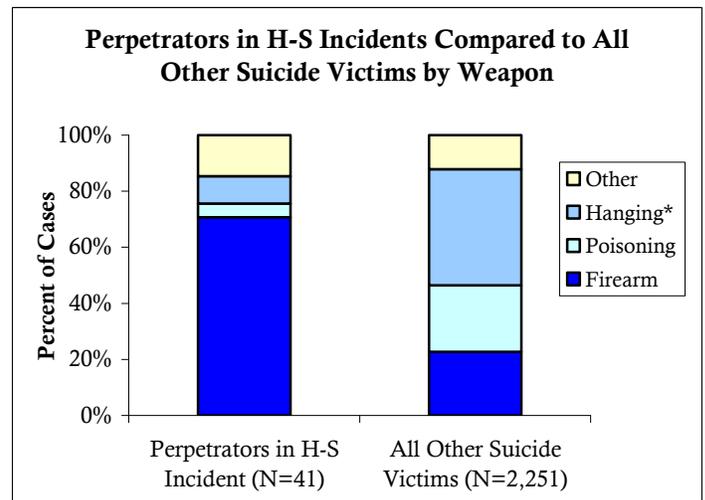
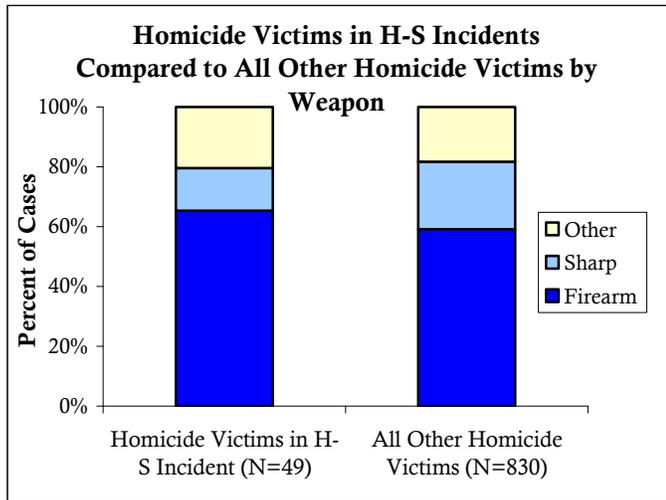
- A larger percent of homicide victims in H-S incidents were married (37%) compared to all other homicide victims (13%).
- A smaller percent of homicide victims in H-S incidents were never married (41%) compared to all other homicide victims (79%).



Perpetrators

- A similar percent of perpetrators in H-S incidents were married (34%) compared to all other suicide victims (31%).
- A slightly smaller percent of perpetrators in H-S incidents were never married (39%) compared to all other suicide victims (44%).

WEAPONS



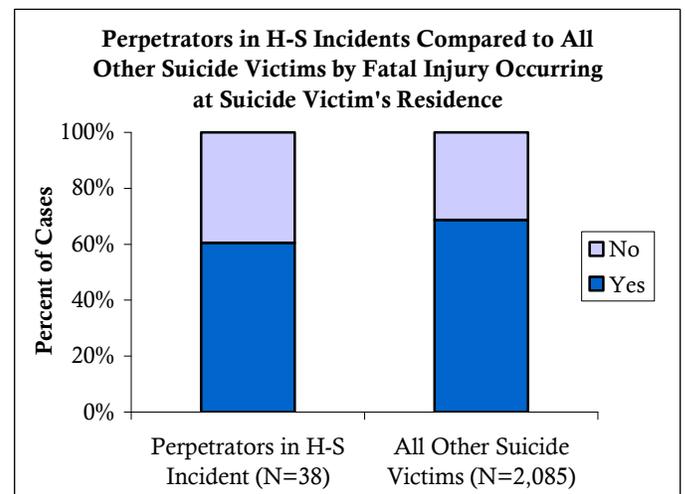
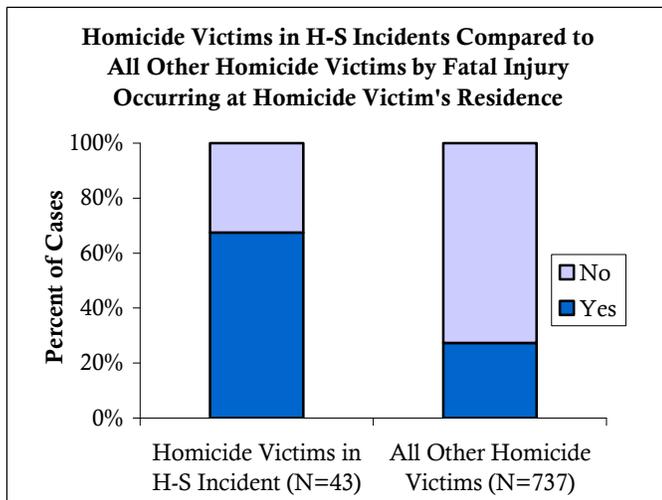
Homicide Victims

- A larger percentage of homicide victims in H-S incidents were killed with a firearm (65%) than all other homicide victims (59%).
- In 34 H-S incidents (83%) the perpetrator used the same weapon to kill the homicide victim(s) as he/she later used to kill himself/herself.

Perpetrators

- A much larger percentage of perpetrators in H-S incidents were killed with a firearm (71%) than all other suicide victims (23%).
- Only 10% of perpetrators hanged themselves in H-S incidents, compared to 41% of all other suicides.

LOCATION OF FATAL INJURY



Homicide Victims

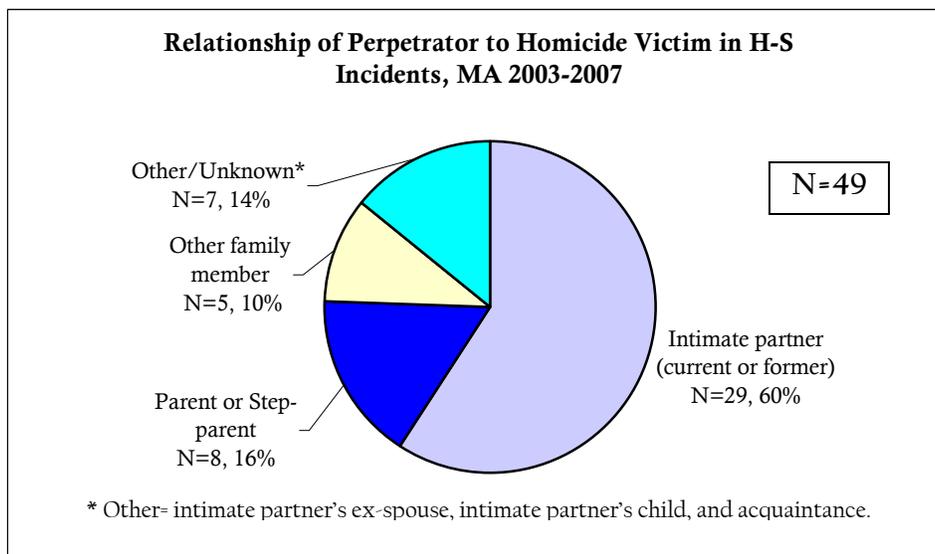
- More homicides occurred at the homicide victim's residence in H-S incidents than in other homicides.
- In 67% of homicides in H-S incidents, the fatal injury occurred at the homicide victim's residence, compared to 27% of all other homicides.

Perpetrators

- In 61% of suicides in H-S incidents, the fatal injury occurred at the perpetrator's residence, compared to 69% of all other suicides.

* Hanging as a weapon also includes strangulation and suffocation.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HOMICIDE VICTIM AND PERPETRATOR IN H-S INCIDENTS



“Relationship” describes the context of how the victim and perpetrator knew each other or if they did not know each other. The relationship could be intimate partners, siblings, acquaintances, co-workers, strangers, etc.

- All but one of the homicide victims in H-S incidents knew their killer (N=48); none were known to be strangers to each other (one relationship was unknown).
- 60% (N=29) of homicide victims in H-S incidents were killed by a current or former intimate partner.
- 16% (N=8) of homicide victims in H-S incidents were killed by a parent or step-parent.

CIRCUMSTANCE

Circumstances are known details that describe the incident, such as related to intimate partner violence, jealousy, drugs, and gangs. Circumstances also include any type of difficulty the victim may have been experiencing before his/her death, such as mental health, financial, job, school, or relationship problems. There were not enough circumstances known for perpetrators to analyze, but among homicide victims in H-S incidents, at least one circumstance was noted for 45 (92%) of victims. Intimate partner violence (IPV) was the most commonly noted circumstance. IPV-related deaths include homicides in which one intimate partner (current or former) kills another and those victims associated with intimate partner violence conflict, for example, children, sexual rivals, and bystanders.

- Of these 45 homicides with known circumstances, 37 (82%) were IPV-related.
- “Other argument” was the second most commonly noted circumstance N=10, 22%. Other argument includes interpersonal conflicts such as abuse, insult, grudge, or personal revenge that precipitated the killing.
- With the exception of IPV and other argument, very little circumstance data is available for these incidents. One possible reason for this is that less investigation is necessary to determine the perpetrator or the manner and cause of death in these incidents.

TOXICOLOGY RESULTS

Toxicology tests for substances in the body, such as alcohol, medications, and illegal drugs. MAVDRS collects information from the Medical Examiner's file on toxicology results in the following categories: amphetamines, antidepressants, opiates, cocaine, marijuana, and another category called “other substance,” which includes any substance that cannot fit into the before-mentioned categories, including over-the-counter medications, benzodiazepines, anti-psychotics, carbon monoxide levels, other toxic agents, etc. A comparison of toxicology results cannot be done of perpetrators of H-S incidents with perpetrators of all other homicides. Exact numbers were too low to report but the following was ascertained from MAVDRS data:

Homicide victims

- Less than five victims were positive for cocaine.
- Less than five victims were positive for both cocaine and opiates.

Perpetrators

- Less than five perpetrators had a blood alcohol concentration above the legal limit of 0.08.
- Less than five perpetrators were positive for cocaine and marijuana.

MASSACHUSETTS COMPARED TO OTHER STATES

In March 2009, *Injury Prevention* published an article called “Characteristics Of Homicide Followed By Suicide Incidents In Multiple States, 2003-2004.”* The multiple states that provided data are the 17 states participating in the National Violent Death Reporting System, including Massachusetts.

Key findings from multiple states, 2003-2004:

- 408 incidents were identified as H-S incidents
- 82% of the H-S deaths were caused by firearms
- Over half the homicide victims are current or former intimate partners of the perpetrator
- 91% of the incidents were perpetrated by males
- 98% of the victims (both homicide and suicide) were over 19 years old
- 77% of all victims (homicide and suicide) were White, non-Hispanic
- Most H-S incidents occurred in a residence (82%)
- 52% of the *child* homicides were perpetrated by females, who then killed themselves
- Less than 5% of H-S incidents occurred between strangers
- 11% of perpetrators had a documented mental illness
- 7 homicides were mercy killings, 6 of these were over age 55

A note about “mercy killings”

“Mercy killings” describe an event where one person, usually a caregiver, kills their spouse because he/she is suffering from a debilitating illness, then kills himself/herself. When these events occur, they are most likely to be widely publicized in the media, however, the data in Massachusetts shows these are extremely rare occurrences. MAVDRS data includes less than five of these events occurring between 2003 and 2007.

Conclusion

This bulletin has provided insight into H-S incidents in Massachusetts. While state-specific information provides value to local public health and law enforcement officials, national data from all 50 states must be obtained to complete the picture and establish effective national H-S prevention policies and programs.

Sources:

* *Injury Prevention* 2006;12(Suppl II):ii33-ii38. doi:10.1136/ip.2006.012807; *Characteristics of homicide followed by suicide incidents in multiple states, 2003-2004*. Bossarte, RM, Simon, TR, Barker, L

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MAVDRS

Violent death represents a serious but preventable public health problem. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) introduced the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) in 2001 in order to improve the surveillance of violent deaths nationwide, and to provide the information needed to reduce and prevent violent death. NVDRS links data from death certificates, medical examiner files, and police reports to provide a more complete picture of the circumstances surrounding violent deaths. Detailed information from multiple sources enhances the ability of researchers, prevention specialists and policymakers to develop a better understanding of when, where, why and how violent deaths occur.

The Massachusetts Violent Death Reporting System (MAVDRS) operates within the Injury Surveillance Program at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. MAVDRS captures all violent deaths (homicides, suicides, deaths of undetermined intent and all firearm deaths) occurring in MA and has been collecting data since 2003.

