

The Reporter – online edition

August 19, 2010

The Downward Spiral

Why do some with no hope take others with them to the grave?

By Jesse Marx

A man shot his wife in June near Peoria before turning the gun on himself during a police chase.

A woman slayed her three children last month before setting her Staten Island home ablaze and perishing in the fire.

The details of murder-suicides across the country have been well-documented in the media. The shooting deaths last week of Larry Harris and Tabatha Oliver in Chicago Ridge, and Bernadette and John Huladek in Oak Lawn are yet another additions to the public record.

Why a person commits both murder and suicide, however, remains an elusive and difficult question to answer, even amongst surviving family members. It is perhaps too personal a question to answer with any certainty, but common enough for forensic psychiatrists and police to take a stab at it.

“The best predictor, of any person, is their past history of violence,” said Dr. Jagannathan Srinivasaraghavan, a.k.a. Dr. Van, president of the Illinois Psychiatric Association (IPA).

Larry Harris’ mother, Ruth Harris, reportedly visited with her son several hours before he gunned down Oliver, an ex-girlfriend, Aug. 10 outside Westfield Mall in Chicago Ridge; but she saw nothing in his demeanor that raised her suspicion. Harris did not have a history of violence, according to Chicago Ridge police. By these accounts, he did not fit the mold of a murderer.

Huladek, on the other hand, had recently been charged with assault, had reportedly threatened his wife, and had an order of protection issued against him. Huladek, 52, waived a gun in Bernadette’s face on July 23 and threatened to kill her, according to Oak Lawn police. Last Thursday, he confronted her outside their home in the 6800 block of 96th Place, shot her to death and then took his own life. A note found amongst his personal belongings indicated Huladek blamed Bernadette for his problems, police said.

Both acts were likely premeditated, said Dr. Daniel Yohanna, an associate professor at the University of Chicago Medical Center.

“Even if it’s hours, you have to get a gun,” he said.

From anger to vengeance

Van believes anger, directed inward and out, coupled with “a core of violence” can impair the judgment of certain personality types until they are unable to refrain from letting it out.

“You have to look at the dynamics,” said Van, who is also a professor emeritus at Southern Illinois University. “Every case is not really the same, but they may have similar characteristics.”

Women who commit murder and suicide tend to possess histrionic personality disorders, Van noted. They are emotional, attention-seeking and highly sensitive, whereas male perpetrators are usually narcissistic and antisocial.

“Something snaps, and I don’t know if we could ever determine it,” said Chicago Ridge Police Chief Rob Pyznarski. “It’s not like you can talk to these people now and ask them why.”

The Rev. Edward Cronin, former pastor at St. Alexander Church in Palos Heights, believes violent acts stem from unresolved anger.

“If you don’t deal with [anger] it turns to rage. And once you get rage it moves into vengeance,” he said. Yohanna, a past president of the IPA, noted persons involved in such acts are typically intimate partners in a past or current relationship.

“Stresses, of course, increase the problem,” he said. “If there’s any trend now it’s economic difficulties.”

By the numbers

There are no state or federal tracking systems in the United States, but the Violence Policy Center (VPC) estimates that between 1,000 and 1,500 deaths per year are the results of murder-suicide. Of the 468 suicides, an average of 93 percent are males; of the 640 homicides, an average of 71 percent are female.

Van said 75 percent of such incidents occur amongst elderly couples, one of who can no longer bear the burden of supporting the other.

“It is worst when the man is the caretaker and the woman is ill,” Van said. “Woman handle caretaking responsibilities better than men.”

An additional 45 homicide victims each year are children and teens less than 18 years old, and another 44 youths witness some aspect of the crime. The Huladeks’ 9-year-old daughter reportedly saw her mother dying in the backyard before calling her aunt, who in turn called police.

According to a VPC report released in 2008, “These numbers call into grave question the common belief that suicide, especially firearm suicide, is a solitary act that affects only the shooter.”

Not even the FBI has an extensive database of murder-suicide cases. In the absence of a national tracking system the VPC, a non-profit research organization based in Washington, D.C., collects and analyzes news reports. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also compile murder- suicide datum from medical examiners and police, but admits to being “hampered by fragmented and incomplete information on the circumstances surrounding homicides and suicides.”

American psychiatrist Karl Menninger believed murder and suicide were interchangeable acts — the one often forestalling the other. The research of Milton Rosenbaum, a leader in the psychosomatic origins of disease, revealed these cases were overwhelmingly committed by depressed men.

Van considers such men more desperate than depressed.

“They think, ‘If I can’t have you, I’m not going to let anyone else have you,’” she said.

Witnesses told police Oliver’s last words may have been, “There might be a problem,” as she exited a bus and walked in the direction of Harris, who was waiting for her near her car. Pyznarski believes Oliver had an indication of Harris’ violent potential but had kept her concerns quiet.

Women caught unaware in a suicide- pact are often diffident and intimidated, and have dependent personalities, Van explained.

Guns used most

The number of murder-suicides from state to state and county to county depends heavily on the availability of guns, said Liane Jackson, a spokeswoman for the Cook County sheriff’s office.

Guns accounted for 89 percent of all murder-suicides in the United States in 2007, a decrease from 95 percent in 2002, according to VPC. Florida and Texas, two states with comparatively lenient gun control laws, topped the list.

“Firearms allow shooters to act on impulse,” a VPC report states.

Chicago Ridge police are working with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives to help trace the unregistered gun Harris used. Oak Lawn police reportedly removed some, but not all, of John Huladek’s guns and ammunition from the home when they arrested him last month, and are working to trace the one left behind.

To better understand the motivation involved and develop effective preventative strategies, VPC advises the federal government erect a nationwide database that tracks extensive backgrounds of the perpetrator, as well as his or her weapon. Many people find the task of developing universal preventive methods more daunting than centralizing information and statistics.

“We can educate people about domestic violence and substance abuse, features that could evolve into these things, but what else can you do?” Van said.

At the very least, substance intervention and psychotherapy are ways to mitigate risk, Yohanna said. Abusers need treatment as much as the abused.

“We usually don’t think about treating the aggressor but they also need help,” he said.

This is part of the [August 19, 2010](#) online edition of *The Reporter*.