

Crisis Connection

Violence stalks pregnant women

More mothers-to-be face abuse, homicide

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Thousands of miles separated Tasha Nowlin, Dawna Wright, Jennifer Nielsen and Jessie Davis. Nothing seemed likely to link them together.

Then came the killings.

A bullet tore through Nowlin's throat as she stood on a Virginia sidewalk June 9. Three days later, Wright slumped in her California office after being shot in the head. On June 14, a knife dropped Nielsen outside a North Carolina convenience store; Davis died the same day in her home near Canton.

Four pregnant women, four murder cases - all in just six days.

And that's not unusual.

Homicide is a leading cause of death in America among pregnant and postpartum women, according to studies conducted in recent years. Statistics show that more pregnant women or mothers of newborns die at someone's hands than of any individual medical cause.

How many of these women lose their lives violently every year?

The toll is difficult to calculate given the lack of a uniform reporting system on pregnant murder victims, researchers said.

A national study published two years ago identified 617 homicides involving pregnancy between 1991 and 1999. A Washington Post analysis a year earlier uncovered 1,367 killings of pregnant woman and new mothers between 1990 and 2004. In both cases, the authors deemed the totals underestimate.

Numbers aren't available for Ohio, but they will be in the future: The state modified its standard death certificate this year to track the relationship between homicides and pregnancies. The form now includes a space to indicate whether a woman who met a suspicious or violent end was pregnant.

"We need to know what's going on with this," said State Sen. Patricia Clancy, a Republican from suburban Cincinnati who initiated the change in 2003 while serving as a state representative. She called the national statistics "startling."

But those who deal with the issue of domestic violence say the numbers reflect a sad reality. About one out of every 20 pregnant women endures physical abuse, according to Debbie Lee, the managing director of the Family Violence Prevention Fund.

Lee's group estimates that 324,000 pregnant American women a year are punched, kicked, pushed down - or worse. Each year there are about 960,000 incidents of

violence against women by their former and current spouses or partners, according to its Web site.

The 47-bed shelter run by Cleveland's Domestic Violence Center regularly sees pregnant visitors, said Cathleen Alexander, the agency's executive director. She said women in relationships with a history of abuse often report escalating violence during their pregnancy; other women said the pregnancy itself launches attacks.

"People look at pregnancy as a miracle of the human condition," Alexander said. "To have it also be the occasion of terrible violence and death . . . it's incomprehensible. But it happens."

Most of the killings are carried out by men the women knew and loved, according to the Washington Post examination. A more in-depth review of a single year's cases concluded that two-thirds "had a strong connection to the pregnancy or involved a domestic-violence clash."

In three of the killings between June 9 and June 14, police targeted the victim's boyfriend and father-to-be. Two are under arrest, including Canton police officer Bobby Cutts Jr., who is accused of killing Davis in her Lake Township home. The third remains on the lam.

In the fourth case, involving the North Carolina woman, police report no suspects. Violence during pregnancy needs to be talked about more openly, said Jeani Chang, an epidemiologist with the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention who led the 2005 national study. She said obstetricians need to discuss the issue with their patients. "I don't think people are aware of what the statistics say," Chang said. "But the risk is out there."

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