

20 YEARS OF FEMICIDE RESEARCH IN SOUTH AFRICA

Authors: Naeemah Abrahams, Shibe Mhlongo, Bianca Dekel, Esnat Chirwa, Asiphe Ketelo, Carl Lombard, Shanaaz Mathews, Gérard Labuschagne, Lorna J Martin, Tirhani Manganyi, Tholsie Gounden, Leane Ramsoomar, Nwabisa Shai, Richard Matzopoulos, Megan Prinsloo & Rachel Jewkes.

Introduction

Femicide is the most extreme form of gender-based violence (GBV) and South Africa has the highest rates of femicide in the world. Bemoaning another femicide is the new normal in the country, yet in our outrage we must not lose sight of the fact that femicide is preventable. The Gender & Health Research Unit of the South African Medical Research Council has been studying femicide in South Africa for more than 20 years. In 1999 we showed four women were killed every day by their husband or boyfriend (intimate

partner), which decreased to three women a day in 2009. Our third study in 2017 showed levels of intimate partner femicide remained unchanged and we continued to have three women killed per day by an intimate partner.

In this research brief we show findings of the 4th national femicide study, which coincided, with the first year of COVID-19 (April 2020-March 2021).

Study methods

In the four surveys, we followed the same methodology and used the same definitions of femicide, intimate-partner femicide (IPF) and non-intimate partner femicide (NIPF) (See Box 1) which allowed us to track femicide over 20 years. We drew random samples from medico-legal laboratories (mortuaries) and at each, we identified all females aged 14 years and over who were registered as deaths related to murder for each of the survey years. In the most recent survey, our study period was between 1 April 2020 and 30 March 2021. We extracted data from the mortuary file including the autopsy reports. For each case, we conducted interviews with police investigators to verify if the victim was murdered and collected information on what was known, or suspected, about the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator (i.e. whether it was an intimate partner). The police extracted data on the crime and investigation from the SAPS case files (dockets).

The survey design allowed for the data to be weighted to provide national estimates and we increased our sample in the 2017 and 2020/21 to also calculate Provincial estimates. Missing data on perpetrators has increased substantially in recent years, increasing the number of unsolved cases. To avoid underestimating femicide due to missing perpetrator data, we used multiple imputation (statistical) techniques to allocate cases to the IPF and NIPF groups where this information was missing. For example, information on the differences in the patterns related to age, place of death and mechanism of death was used in 2017 and 2020/21 for this process. Only highly decomposed female bodies or skeletons, where the manner of death could not be established, were excluded.

We calculated Age Standardised Rates (ASRs) and Incident Rate Ratios (IRRs) to compare femicide rates between the studies (between 1999 and 2009 and between 2017 and 2020/21). Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Ethics Committee of the South African Medical Research Council and further approval and access to data was obtained from the National Department of Health and the South African Police Service.

Box 1: Definition of Terms

Femicide	Murder of women
Intimate-Partner Femicide	Murder of women by an intimate partner (i.e. a current or ex-husband/ boyfriend, same sex partner or a rejected would-be lover)
Non-Intimate Partner Femicide	Murder of women by someone other than an intimate partner (stranger, family member, acquaintance etc.)
Suspected Sexual (rape) Femicide	Murder of women that occurred with a sexual component identified during investigation

Results

Overall Femicide

The estimated number of overall femicide cases across the four surveys is presented in Figure 1. We saw a decline in femicide cases between 1999 and 2009, but the number has remained much the same thereafter.

Intimate Partner Femicide

In Figure 2 we present the number of women killed by an intimate partner and we see a large decline between 1999 and 2009, but the rate of decline slowed in 2017. During the COVID-19 period overall, a small but statistically significant increase in intimate partner femicide cases was recorded. The same increase was not found for overall femicides and for non-intimate partner femicide.

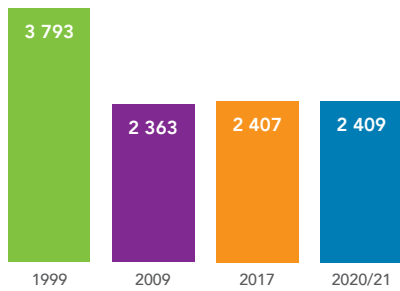


Figure 1: Femicide in South Africa: 1999-2021

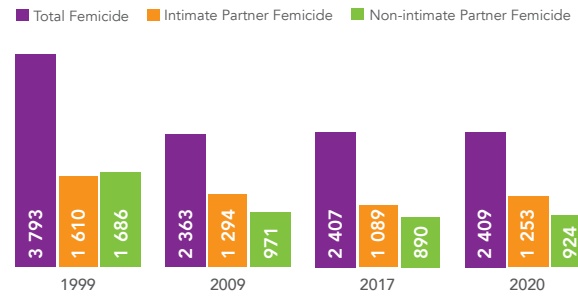


Figure 2: Femicide, intimate partner femicide and non-intimate partner femicide: 1999-2020/21

* Total femicides include cases where perpetrators were not identified by the police and IPF and NIPF does not add up to total femicides.

In 2020/21, as in the previous decade, three women were killed per day by an intimate partner in South Africa.

Examining the age standardised rates, allows us to see more clearly the number of cases in comparison to the female population. This is presented in Table 1 and shows an increase in the rate of intimate partner femicide in 2020/21 compared to 2017.

Table 1: Femicide age standardized rates across the 4 surveys: per 100 000 female population showing significant change in rates

	1999	2009	2017	2020
Femicide overall	24.2 (15.5-32.9)	12.6 (8.5-16.6)	11.1 (9.8-12.4)	10.6 (9.7-11.5)
Intimate Partner Femicide*	9.5 (6.4-12.7)	6.6 (5.3-8.0)	4.9 (4.1-5.8)	5.5 (4.7-6.2)
Non-Intimate Partner Femicide*	11.4 (6.9-15.9)	5.4 (4.2-6.6)	4.2 (3.4-4.9)	4.1 (3.4-4.8)

* Across the four studies the IPF and NIPF rates do not add up to the overall femicide rate due to missing data from South African Police. Police dockets could not be located for 502 femicides in 1999, 39 in 2009, 379 in 2017 and 206 in 2020/21.

Overall femicide continued to decline, but intimate partner femicide did not.

Femicide Across the Provinces

The provincial femicide rates for 2017 and 2020/21 are shown in Table 2. The Eastern Cape remained the province with the highest rates for all three types of femicide, double the national rates. Most provinces showed a decrease in overall femicide in 2020/21 compared to 2017. An exception was Gauteng, which reported a significant increase; there was some evidence of an increase in Mpumalanga and Limpopo and no change in the North West. Intimate partner femicide rates significantly increased

in the Eastern Cape and Gauteng in 2020/21 compared to 2017. There was some evidence of an increase in North West, Limpopo and Mpumalanga, although not statistically significant. Three provinces had some evidence of a decrease in 2020/21 compared to 2017 (Western Cape; Northern Cape; and Free State) but not statistically significant. In KwaZulu-Natal rates were unchanged. Minimal changes in non-intimate partner femicide were reported in all provinces, but these were not statistically significant.

Table 2: Femicide rates across provinces for 2017 and 2020/21

	Femicide		Intimate Partner Femicide		Non-Intimate Partner Femicide	
	2017	2020/21	2017	2020/21	2017	2020/21
Western Cape	12.3 (12.0-12.5)	10.8 (10.8-10.8)	4.9 (4.5-5.3)	4.1 (2.1-6.3)	4.9 (4.5-5.3)	5.6 (1.7-9.3)
Eastern Cape	22.3 (20.0-24.6)	21.5 (17.8-25.1)	8.0 (6.1-9.9) *	10.8 (4.8-18.6)*	9.9 (8.6-11.3)	8.9 (2.1-16)
Northern Cape	11.1 (5.3-16.8)	7.6 (1.9-16.2)	6.3 (2.8-9.7)	3.1 (0-12.5)	2.9 (1.5-4.4)	3.2 (0.5-14.2)
Free State	12.9 (11-14.9)	8.4 (4.4-12.6)	5.8 (4.9-6.7)	3.6 (1.5-6)	4.9 (3.8-6.1)	3.3 (0.3-7.2)
Kwa-Zulu Natal	14.0 (11.8-16.2)	12.1 (9.1-15.1)	5.9 (4.6-7.3)	5.5 (3.2-7.7)	5.4 (4.2-6.6)	5.4 (3.2-7.6)
North West	7.7 (7.1-8.3)	7.4 (5.2-9.6)	3.7 (3-4.4)	5.0 (1.4-8.7)	2.6 (2.1-3.1)	2.1 (0.8-9.6)
Gauteng *	8.1 (5.3-11)*	9.2 (6.4-12)*	3.8 (2.4-5.3)*	5.5 (2.3-8.7)*	2.8 (2.1-3.4)	3.0 (0.3-7)
Mpumalanga	5.7 (4.1-7.3)	6.7 (4.1-9.4)	3.1 (1.9- 4.4)	3.9 (2.4-5.4)	1.9 (1.3-2.4)	1.8 (0.3-3.6)
Limpopo	4.9 (4.0-5.9)	5.4 (2.5-8.4)	2.3 (1.4-3.3)	3.7 (0.8-7)	2.4 (1.5-3.3)	1.3 (0-4.3)
South Africa	11.1 (9.8-12.4)	10.6 (9.7-11.5)	4.9 (4.1-5.8)	5.5 (4.7-6.2)*	4.2 (3.4-4.9)	4.1 (3.4-4.8)

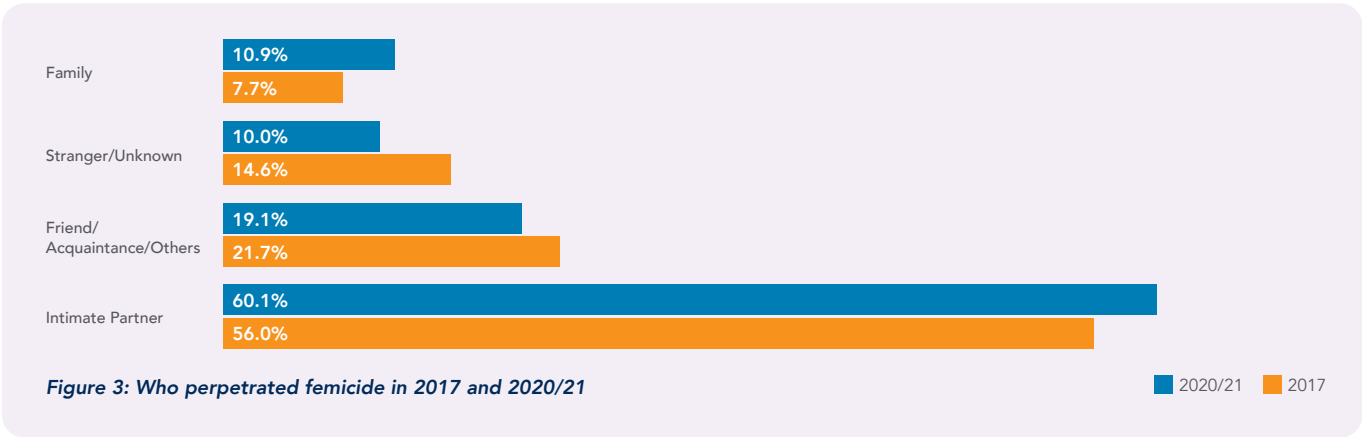
*Significant change in rates

Very little change Decrease but non-significant Increase but non-significant Statistically significant increase

Gauteng was the only province that reported increases in all types of femicides in 2020/21.

Who Perpetrates Femicide?

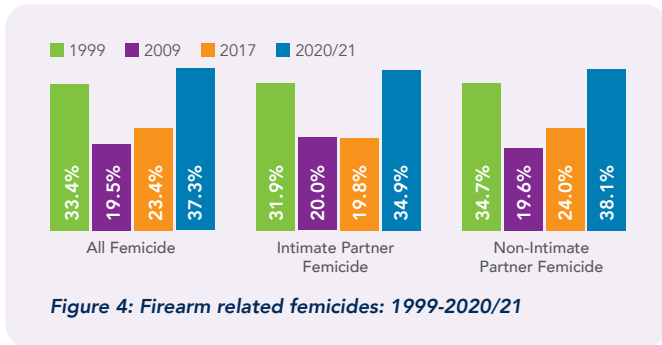
Intimate partners remained the most common perpetrator in all four surveys. In 2017 they constituted just over half (56%) of all femicides, and in 2020/21 this has crept up to 60.1% (Figure 3). About 1 in 5 women were killed by a friend or an acquaintance (19.1%). Family members were the perpetrators in 10.9% of the women killed in 2020/21.



Firearm-related Femicides

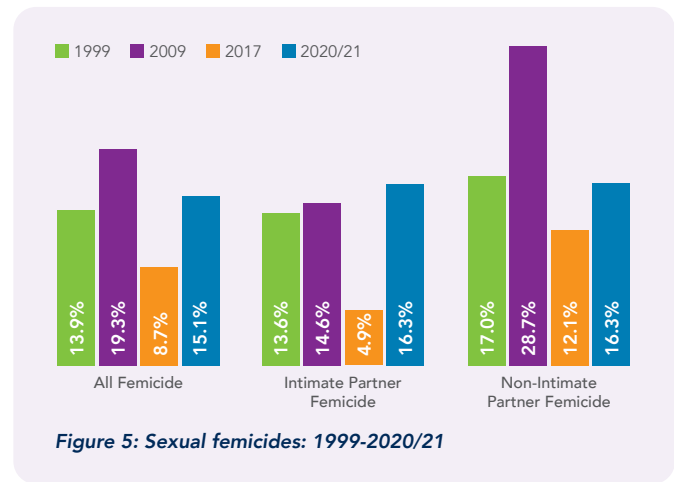
Figure 4 presents the data on firearm-related femicides from 1999 to 2020/21 and shows that more than 1 in 3 women were killed with a firearm in 2020/21. The proportion of women killed by a firearm has increased since 2009 and across all types of femicide, in 2020/21 it exceeded the levels reported in 1999.

Gunshots were the most common manner of death in which women were killed in 2020/21.



Sexual/Rape Femicides

Sexual femicide remained consistently higher among women killed by non-partners (NIPF) than by intimate partners, but an increase in sexual femicides were found across both forms of femicide during the COVID-19, with 1 in 6 women killed having evidence of the sexual violence at time of the murder (Figure 5).

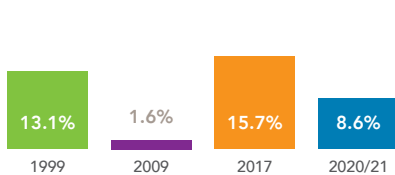


How are our police and justice systems responding to femicide?

We found a mixed picture in the police and criminal justice system's response to femicide with improvement in the number of cases located in the police information system in 2020/21 compared to 2017.

However, in 2020/21, in 44.5% of cases a perpetrator was not identified, almost half the total number of cases (Figure 6). This points to substantially poorer performance than in 2017, when the proportion (30%) was already very high. This points to lack of efforts to investigate such murders.

Femicide cases not in the police system



Perpetrator not identified during investigation

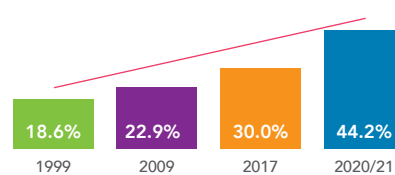


Figure 6: Case files not located and perpetrators not identified by police

Nearly 50% of perpetrators were not identified during police investigations in 2020/21.

Convictions of femicide cases

Among the cases where a perpetrator was identified by police, we found convictions decreased with the lowest levels reported during the COVID-19 year (Figure 7). Less than 1 in 5, of the intimate partner femicide cases ended with a conviction. If we consider the increased number of cases with unidentified perpetrators, it is evident that the chances of a murdered woman receiving justice in 2020/21 significantly decreased.

Alcohol sales and femicide during COVID-19

Alcohol was shown to play a key role in the risk of femicide during COVID-19. We saw a decrease in the number of femicides and intimate partner femicides during periods of a complete ban on the sale of alcohol. Even when curfews were relaxed to only night-time curfews (May, August and January), and there were alcohol sales restrictions, a decrease in femicide was noted. There was an upswing in femicides following the end of alcohol sales restrictions. Despite the decrease during alcohol sale restrictions, we found an overall increase in intimate partner femicide during the COVID-19 year (Figure 8).

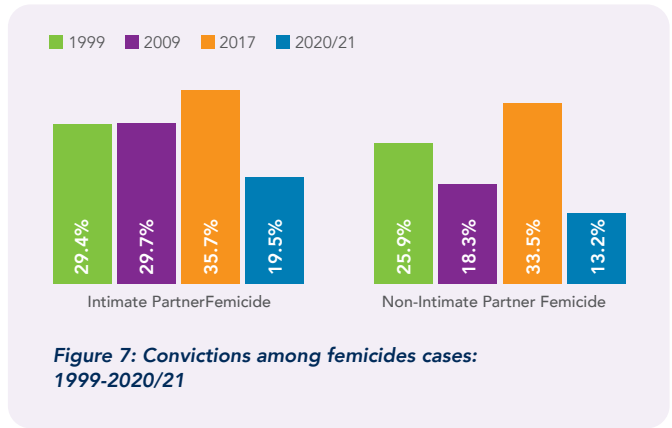


Figure 7: Convictions among femicide cases: 1999-2020/21

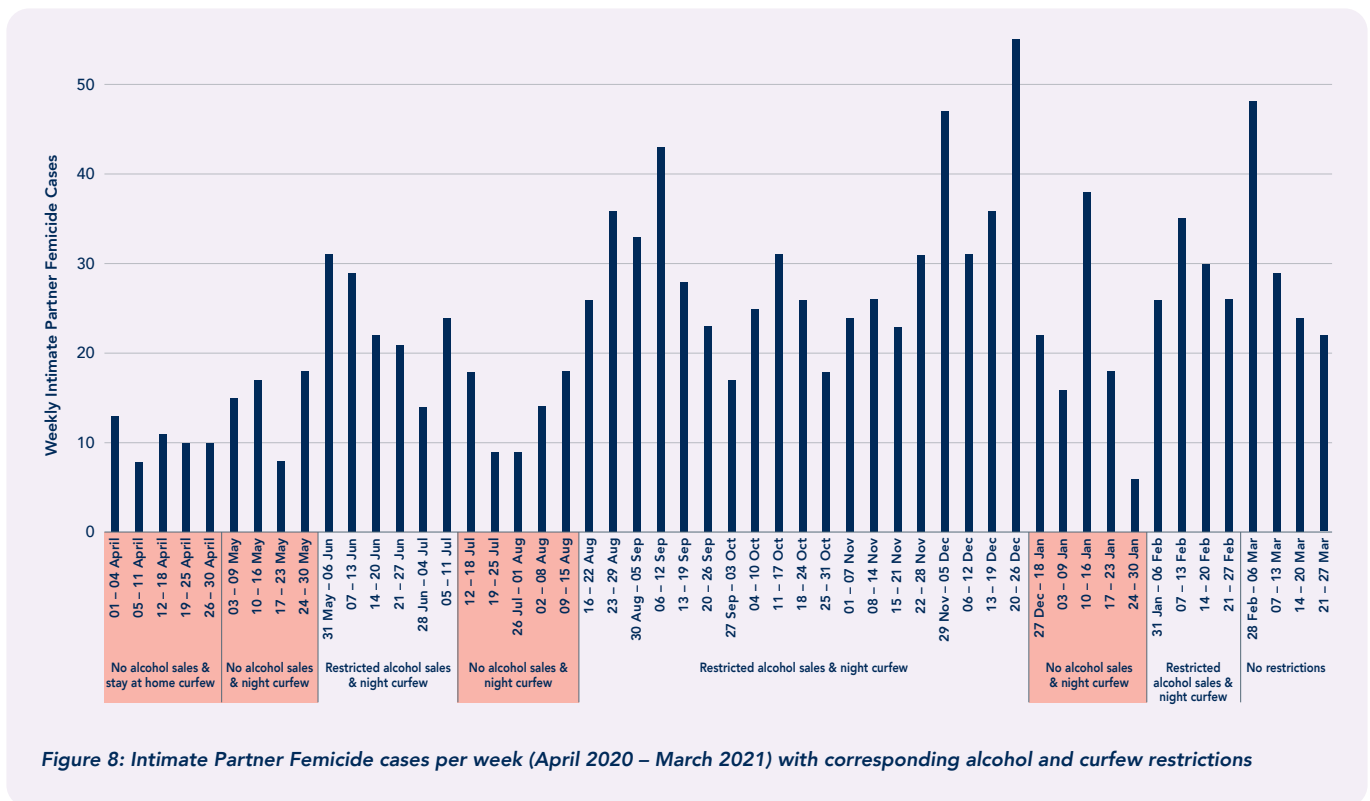


Figure 8: Intimate Partner Femicide cases per week (April 2020 – March 2021) with corresponding alcohol and curfew restrictions

Conclusion

There was no difference in the estimated number of women murdered in 2017 (2,407) and in 2020/21 (2,409), which is nearly 7 women a day in South Africa. We found 60% of the women killed in 2020/21 were killed by an intimate partner. Although the overall number of femicide cases reached a plateau in 2020/21, this was not found for intimate partner femicide cases, where a significant increase was found during the first COVID-19 year. This increase was despite the drop in overall femicide during periods of alcohol sales ban. The South African intimate partner femicide rate remains five times the global rate.

The COVID-19 period also provided us with a natural experiment and we have shown the hugely damaging role of alcohol on femicide. There is a critical need to address alcohol in femicide prevention.

A concern is the increase of rape as a feature of femicide. Rape was always previously more common among women killed by non-intimate partners, but the most recent study has found similar proportions of rape among women killed by an intimate partner (16.3%). The unabated increase in firearm related femicide over the 10 years since 2009 is an indication that firearm control has been lost in the country and reflects the deterioration in policing and lack of response to the calls for effective implementation of the Firearms Control Act.

Our research over two decades shows an appalling decline in police investigations with the non-identification of perpetrators from 1999 to 2020/21 more than doubled (from 19% to 44%). This remains a huge concern and improved police responses are needed to ensure justice for all who are murdered. These are key objectives of the Integrated National Femicide Prevention Strategy which was developed in 2022 and is still awaiting approval by Cabinet.

In tracking femicide over 20 years, we have shown that South Africa is not moving forward in the prevention of femicide. In the first ten year from 1999 to 2009 we showed femicide is preventable, but we have not sustained this progress. We have a wealth of knowledge and increasing expertise to guide us to deliver evidence-based prevention. Our findings indicate that efforts towards prevention presently is not effective and we need to intensify national, provincial and local efforts. We have to work across sectors to address poverty and economic empowerment, childhood violence, unemployment, alcohol and drug use, and norms on gender and violence, improve mental health care and strengthening the implementation of laws. Our National Strategic Plan (NSP) and the recent National Integrated Femicide Prevention strategy, address these interrelated drivers and we need to ensure these plans are adequately funded to ensure success.