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South African men face massive, disproportionate burden of homicide – UCT research

A recent study by researchers from the University of Cape Town (UCT) and the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) confirmed that South African men bear an enormous burden of homicide, reflecting their neglect in prevention and policy responses to violence.

Globally, homicide is the third-leading cause of death for men aged 15-44, with the heaviest burden in low- and middle-income countries. South Africa has one of the highest homicide rates, six times the global average.

The study is titled "South Africa's male homicide epidemic hiding in plain sight: Exploring sex differences and patterns in homicide risk in a retrospective descriptive study of postmortem investigations".

Professor Richard Matzopoulos, lead author and honorary professor in UCT's Division of Public Health Medicine and director of the SAMRC's Burden of Disease Research Unit, said there was a need to understand that many men were marginalised and vulnerable because of inequality and poverty, and that they were subject to overwhelming levels of interpersonal violence.

"We hope that our study – with the most recent, accurate and nationally representative data on injury mortality from any African country – helps to mobilise a strong, effective response to men's massive homicide risk in South Africa," said Matzopoulos.

In a study published in *PLoS Global Public Health*, the team compared male and female victim profiles from 2017 against global averages and 2009 estimates. They conducted a retrospective descriptive study of routine postmortem investigation data via a nationally representative survey of mortuaries sampled from eight of South Africa's nine provinces for all deaths in 2017.

The team obtained data from postmortem reports and ancillary documentation, including police reports and hospital records. For the ninth province, the Western Cape, the survey data were combined with compatible routinely captured data from the provincial Forensic Pathology Service (FPS), which maintains this data for all 16 medico-legal mortuaries in the province.

The study found that 87% of the victims were men, equating to seven male deaths for every female, with rates as high as 11:1 in the Western Cape. Men had a higher homicide risk than women of all ages, and this rose to eight times higher in the age group 15-44.

“These devastating statistics highlight the fact that we have largely ignored men in our response to violence. Violence is still not understood as a public health issue that needs a concerted public health response,” said co-author Dr Morna Cornell, senior researcher in UCT’s School of Public Health.

While there are numerous interventions to prevent violence against women, Matzopoulos said that the disproportionate burden of homicide on men has not resulted in meaningful prevention of violence against men.

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