

Chapter 1

Introduction

Velma Margie Bullard Barfield, a fifty-year-old grandmother, was put to death by the state of North Carolina in November of 1984 for allegedly poisoning a number of people who were close to her, including her mother. As the last female homicide offender executed in the United States, Barfield will undoubtedly be remembered as a poisoner. Similarly, the name of Lucretia Borgia is considered synonymous with the appellation “woman poisoner.” Alleged poisoning was the crime of nineteenth-century America, and “murder by poison was particularly feared because there was no way to see it coming or to defend against it”; poisoning was also “associated with women” (Jones, 1980: 103). In fact, throughout history, women who kill have been viewed as distancing themselves from their victims through the application of measured doses of poison over lengthy periods of time—a murder method often considered devious, cunning, and deceitful.

In his book *The Criminality of Women* (1950), Otto Pollak advanced a theory of female criminality that emphasized women’s “deceitfulness” and claimed, “In general, it can be concluded that homicide committed by women can be called secret murder and that the general observations about the highly masked character of female crime are well substantiated by the modus operandi of the woman who kills” (p. 19). Such a view has been paralleled in literature, where a nexus has often been asserted between the female animal in the wild and the human female. The poet Rudyard Kipling, for example, claimed that “the female of the species is more deadly than the male,” while the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche declared that “in revenge and in love woman is more barbarous than man.” In her view of the literature on women who killed their mates from 1895 to 1970, Rasche (1990: 48) describes such views as the “deadlier species” model and notes that “traditionally, woman has been viewed in Western culture as a different species of creature from man.” Homicide arrest statistics suggest that, antithetical to the musings of male literary writers, women are not the deadliest of the species. Quite the

contrary: in male-male and female-female recorded homicides, "*the difference between the sexes is immense, and it is universal*. There is no known human society in which the level of lethal violence among women even begins to approach that among men" (Daly and Wilson, 1988: 146). Nor is there "evidence that women in modern America are approaching the level of violent conflict prevailing among men. Indeed there is no evidence that the women in *any* society have *ever* approached the level of violent conflict prevailing among men in the same society" (ibid., p. 149). Very few Americans associate violence with females, and an even lesser number are able to visualize women as significant contributors to the public conception of violence as a national problem, much less adopt a serious view of women as cunning murderers.

Yet, American society reflects a culture that was built on violence. Americans appear to idolize and sensationalize violence in the print media, movies, our television "soaps," "cop" shows, and other television programming. At this writing, the current public fascination with every nuance of former football megastar O. J. Simpson's murder trial is a barometer of the degree of violence addiction endemic in this country. Since violence is so pervasive in our society, it is logical to assume that women have not remained uncontaminated by it. Further, as the renowned violence researcher Murray Straus (1989a) observes, "Female assaults grow out of the same cultural and structural roots as male violence."

In an effort to bring us closer to an understanding of female homicide offenders and concomitantly provide a better perception of the crime of homicide, this book examines female perpetrators who were apprehended for killing other humans. The impetus for this study was a long-standing interest in women criminals and a curiosity that crystallized as the result of a 1984 invitation from Margaret Heckler, then Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, to undertake a review of the major homicide research concerning black women who kill. Despite exhaustive scrutiny of the literature, little was uncovered in that probe for data (Mann, 1986). In light of the increasing rate of violence nationwide, the paucity of information on this specific female offending group, and the fact that young persons of color are the most frequent murder offenders and victims, it became obvious that additional knowledge about female criminal homicide offenders was needed.

This volume is based on the findings of a field study undertaken in 1985 and 1986 in six United States cities with homicide rates equal to or higher than the national rates for the years 1979 and 1983. In addition to time limitations, financial constraints, and data access problems, an attempt was made to designate cities that were proportionately representative of cleared homicide cases by region for 1979 and 1983 according to

the FBI Uniform Crime Reports. The optimal study would have included male killers, but again, time and fiscal constraints precluded such a comparison study which would have required additional male sampling. However, while the inclusion of male subjects would have been desirable, their omission can be justified on the grounds that the principal topic of interest was the rarely studied female homicide offender and the primary thrust of the research was to obtain as complete a picture as possible of each homicide event and of its major actors—the female offender and her victim.

Because of the exploratory nature of the study, no preconceived hypotheses were generated for testing, and by definition the qualitative approach used is limited largely to descriptive measures. Nonetheless, the aforementioned intensive review of the literature on female homicide offenders suggested potential research directions and stimulated a number of research questions. Previous investigative research experience demonstrated that additional questions normally arise after the data are analyzed; this effort was no exception. The study is configured by the following research questions: (1) Is the “subculture of violence” theory applicable to African American female homicide offenders? (2) Is there any validity to the “southern subculture of violence” as applied to women killers? (3) Is an economic theory of crime applicable to women who commit homicide? (4) How significant is the role played by drugs (alcohol and narcotics) in female-perpetrated homicides? (5) Can victim precipitation and/or the “battered woman syndrome” predict female criminal homicide? (6) Are ecological factors—season/weather, time, day of week— influential in murders committed by females? (7) Are minority women who murder treated more punitively by the criminal justice system than nonminority women? (8) Does race of the victim influence the sentencing process? (9) Are there city/regional differences in the criminal court processing of women who kill?

Race and ethnicity are paramount considerations in the study of murder because of the disproportionate number of instances in which both the victims of an offense and those arrested for its commission, are racial/ethnic minorities. Women of color are no exception to the race/homicide nexus, particularly African American women. Even though the UCR Supplemental Homicide Reports (SHR) provide some details on the characteristics of offenders and their victims, they do not yield other specifics of interest on female offenders or certain nuances of the crime indicated in the commission of homicide. This study was undertaken to close some of these information gaps.

DEFINITIONS

The terms *homicide* and *murder* are frequently used interchangeably in the research literature. The Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) record arrests

involving the taking of another's life as *murder and nonnegligent manslaughter*. Daly and Wilson (1988: 14) refer to homicides as "those interpersonal assaults and other acts directed against another person (for example, poisonings) that occur outside the context of warfare, and that prove fatal." However, Wilbanks' (1982: 153) differentiation of the terms is appropriate for our purposes:

Homicide, the more inclusive term, refers to the killing of one human being by another. This term covers both criminal and noncriminal (justifiable and excusable) homicides. *Murder* is a criminal homicide that involves both intent and premeditation. Some states distinguish between *first-degree* (generally requiring both intent and premeditation) and *second-degree* murder (requiring intent but not premeditation). *Manslaughter* is a type of criminal homicide, but is not considered murder. Other types of criminal homicide that are not considered murder are vehicular homicide and negligent homicide.

Although the more exact and preferred nomenclature is *criminal homicide*, depending upon the reference cited in this work, any of these terms may be used.

Female, the generic term for a woman or girl as distinguished from a man or boy, and *woman* are also frequently used interchangeably. Whereas many adolescent females commit criminal homicide, the majority (80.2 percent) of females arrested for this crime are women (U.S. Department of Justice, 1993: 231). For this reason and for consistency, the term *woman* is the preferred term used throughout the book.

FEMALE FAMILY VIOLENCE AND OTHER ASSAULTS

In a recent commentary, McNeely and I (1990) argued that domestic violence is a human issue, not just a gender issue. Our reasoning was based on the facts that "(a) women are more prone than men to engage in severely violent acts; (b) each year more men than women are victimized by their intimates; and (c) between 1975 and 1985 violence by men against women decreased, whereas violence by women against men increased" (p. 130). Leaving the Pandora's box of extent and seriousness of injury inflicted closed for the time being, let us examine the basis of these statements. Murray Straus and his colleagues at the Family Violence Research Program of the Family Research Laboratory at the University of New Hampshire undertook a profound examination of violence in the family in the 1970s. The resultant 1975 National Family Violence Survey (NFVS) discovered that wives assault their husbands at about the same rate that husbands assault their wives (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980). Any violence between spouses yielded annual incidence rates of

12 per 100 couples for both husbands and wives, but the rates of *severe* violence by the wife were 5 per 100 (2,700,000 assaults) compared to 4 per 100 (2,200,000 assaults) for husbands (Straus, 1986: Table II). Also, McLeod's (1984) examination of 6,200 domestic assault cases reported that weapons were involved in 82 percent of male victimizations by females but, conversely, only 25 percent of female victimizations by males involved weapons. In her studies, Steinmetz (1978: 503) found the average violence scores of wives (4.04, 7.82, 7.00, respectively) to be higher than those of the husbands (3.52, 6.00, 6.60, respectively), and also that women's assaultive acts were more frequent. Repeated public surveys in Canada also indicate that wives assault their husbands as often as or more frequently than husbands assault their wives (Christensen, n.d.).

Straus used a much larger nationally representative sample in a replication of his 1975 national survey (6,002 couples compared to the initial survey of 2,143 couples), and again he found women to report physical assaults on their husbands at about the same high rate as the reported assaults on wives by husbands (Straus, 1989b). From 1975 to 1985 the rates of both husband-wife overall violence and severe violence decreased. Whereas wife-husband severe violence rates also decreased, their overall violence rate increased. Although the differences were not statistically significant,¹ Straus found that in minor assaults on their partners, the women's rate slightly exceeded the men's (77 v. 69 per 1,000), but for severe assaults men slightly exceeded the women (49 v. 44 per 1,000).

There is also ample evidence suggesting that men underreport violent encounters with women and, conversely, the possibility that females overreport violence against them (Mann, 1989). Rape universally connotes an assault on a woman by a man, yet women do rape men, usually in gang rapes. In personal interviews with male rape victims, Sarrel and Masters (1982) found posttrauma reactions in all eleven cases of adult males who were sexually molested by females. All of the men experienced symptoms of physical and psychological trauma and described varying levels of "fright, panic, and confusion at the time they were molested" (p. 126). According to sex therapists Masters and Johnson (cited in Sarrel and Masters, 1982), the vast majority of such cases are never reported. Men are disinclined to report rape by other males, so:

How much more reluctant then would be the man who is the victim of sexual assault by gunslinging or knife-wielding women? Would such a man choose to test the credulity of the police or even his closest friends? "I was raped by two women last night" may not fall in the same category as "I was taken aboard a UFO by little green men," but the inherent implausibility of the claim might restrain even a braggart (Rosenfeld, 1983: 28).

Child and elderly abuse are two other forms of family violence perpetrated by females which have only recently been brought to light. In their treatise on family violence issues, Thibault and Rossier (1992) cite figures from a 1986 national study by the American Human Association which show that 60.7 percent of the caretakers reported for child maltreatment were females and that females accounted for 56.8 percent of major physical child abuse cases and 57.3 percent of child fatalities.² These percentages reflect an impressive increase since 1978 when an American Humane Society report on 100,000 cases of child abuse found that only 45 percent of the abusers were women (Mann, 1984a: 24).

Physical mistreatment of the elderly by their adult offspring has been alluded to as "a new plague." Estimates of the annual number of victims of this "hidden family problem" range from 500,000 to 1 million (Pierce and Trotta, 1986: 103). Data from six Florida counties reported by Giordano (1982) indicate that the average victim of multiple abuse was a white female who, if unmarried, was typically abused by her daughter. More recently, Pierce and Trotta (1986: 102) observe that since women are almost always the primary caregivers to the elderly, they are most likely to be the typical abusers. Most often the abusive female relative is a daughter, followed by a granddaughter.

Characteristically, the reason this type of abuse is considered a "hidden" family problem is that such incidents are seldom reported to the authorities. Men will rarely call the police when they are abused by their wives or female lovers; elderly parents are reluctant to bring their daughters or granddaughters to the attention of law enforcement; and because of their age, immaturity, and dependency, infants and small children cannot or will not tell on their mothers.

An endless list of plausible causal factors could be generated to explain female violence directed against family members. Particularly notable would be the internal and external stresses associated with the roles of wife and caregiver. But what about nonfamilial violence perpetrated by women? An examination of the most recent available FBI Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) reveals some rather astonishing statistics involving female arrests for assault. In 1992, for example, 64,359 females were arrested for aggravated assault, a number that constituted 14.8 percent of all persons arrested for this violent index crime (U.S. Department of Justice, 1993: 234). Aggravated assault ranked tenth among the crimes for which females were arrested (2.9 percent). Even more illuminating is the fact that 156,584 females were arrested in 1992 for other (nonfelony) assaults (17.2 percent of total arrests for this offense), which made arrests for these crimes the fourth most frequent arrest offense of females (6.9 percent). Arrest trends from 1988 to 1992 show a 46.6 percent increase in female arrests for other assaults over this time period,

compared to a 26.3 percent increase for males (ibid., p. 224). Over this five-year time span, the percentage increases for aggravated assault were also substantially higher for females (37.4 percent) than for males (24.3 percent). In light of the previous discussion about the reluctance or inability of family members to report violence committed by a wife, child, or mother, we can assume that many such arrests are extrafamilial.

Data collected from the top three states that arrest and imprison women—California, Florida, and New York³—indicate similar rankings of violent crimes committed by women.⁴ There were 10,141 California women arrested for felony assault in 1990, ranking this offense third among female felony arrests (after drugs and thefts) and eighth among all offenses for which women were arrested in that state. That same year, aggravated assault was the second most frequent index crime for which women were arrested in Florida (N = 5,110). Among all female arrests in Florida in 1990, aggravated assault was the fourth most frequent offense. In 1990 in New York State assault ranked first in the felony category and accounted for 14.7 percent of all female felony arrests (N = 3,891); together, misdemeanor and felony assaults totaled 8.1 percent of the 1990 arrests of New York State women (N = 7,703) and were fourth in arrest ranking.

Both the national distributions and the rankings of female arrests for assault in California, Florida, and New York State suggest not only that women are committing an impressive number of assaultive crimes, but also that such arrests are increasing at a faster rate than those of men. In the rank ordering of the frequency of female arrests, assaults clearly occupy a prominent place among the crimes females commit. Furthermore, there is a very thin line between assaults and homicide. It has been pointed out, for instance, that “evidence regarding the escalatory character of interactions that culminate in criminal homicide was provided first by Wolfgang in his rich descriptions of the moves and counter moves in what he styled *victim-precipitated* criminal homicide” (Wilson, 1993: 44). Also, Block’s (1987) seventeen-year study of homicides in Chicago found that 69 percent were initiated by assaultive behavior such as arguments, brawls, or fights.

FEMALE CRIMINAL HOMICIDE OFFENDERS

In an early monograph, *The Contemporary Woman and Crime* (1975), Rita Simon examined longitudinal national data concerning the involvement of women in crime and the types of crime with which they were charged. She reported an average rate of change of -0.05 for female violent crimes over the period 1953–1972 with a 1972 percentage of 11.0 (p. 39), concluding, “A popular impression is that in recent years women

have been committing crimes of violence at a much higher rate than they have in the past is disputed by the facts shown." Undoubtedly the same statement is applicable two decades later, since females were arrested for 12.5 percent of all index violent crimes in 1992 (U.S. Department of Justice, 1993: 234). Finally, Simon's examination revealed that females were arrested for 15.6 percent of all criminal homicides in 1972, for a modest average rate of change of 0.08 over their percentage of 14.1 in 1953. On the basis of this finding, Simon deduced, "For criminal homicide the percentage of males and females have remained remarkably stable over the past 20 years and the average rate of change is practically nil" (p. 41).

Compared to males, female arrests for homicide are not striking. In 1979, one of the years included in the study reported in this volume, there were 18,264 total arrests for murder and nonnegligent manslaughter (U.S. Department of Justice, 1980: 199).⁵ At that time, 13.7 percent of those arrested were females and such arrests constituted only 0.2 percent of all offenses for which females were charged. By 1983, the other year for which data were reported, female arrests for murder still accounted for only 0.2 percent of female total arrests and 13.3 percent of all murder arrests—again far less than the male proportion (U.S. Department of Justice, 1984: 186).⁶ Almost a decade later, the most recent available UCR data indicate that females represented only 9.7 percent of persons arrested for the 19,491 murders in 1992, an appreciable decrease from 1983 (U.S. Department of Justice, 1993: 234). Total arrest trends indicate a decrease of 9.6 percent in female arrests for murder from 1988 to 1992, and by 1992 such arrests dropped to only 0.1 percent of all female arrests (U.S. Department of Justice, 1993: 224).

Returning to our examination of state-level exemplars rather than national homicide statistics, we find that in California and Florida, murder accounted for only 0.1 percent of all female arrests in 1990. Equally modest figures were found for New York State, which matched the 1990 national figure of 0.2 percent.⁷

In sum, up to this point our analysis indicates that, at least according to official statistics, three salient facts seem evident: (1) compared to males, females are not arrested in appreciable numbers for murder; (2) arrests for murder constitute a very small proportion of the crimes for which females are arrested; and (3) there has not been a significant increase in the number of females arrested for murder as a percentage of all such arrests for at least four decades.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON WOMEN MURDERERS

The following discussion of existing studies of women murderers is limited to generic descriptions, since the detailed findings of these

research efforts are interspersed appropriately throughout the book. Another limitation to this review of prior research is that it includes only female offender-based studies or those that substantially discuss female offenders as an identifiable subgroup within a larger data set.⁸ The earlier studies are presented in chronological sequence and ordered in time periods by decade.

One of the most prolific authors on homicide research, William Wilbanks (1982: 155), describes the five most commonly used data bases viewed as "the foundation for descriptive and theoretical studies of female involvement in homicide": (1) the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR); (2) the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS); (3) city studies; (4) prison studies; and (5) "anecdotal studies." His excellent description of these resources, including their positive and negative features, is briefly discussed next (*ibid.*, pp. 155–160).

Uniform Crime Reports (UCR)

In our previous examination of female violence and homicide offending, we relied almost exclusively on Uniform Crime Report statistics to describe the phenomenon. UCR arrest figures derived from local police jurisdictions across the nation are reported to the Federal Bureau of Investigation which publishes them annually. The UCR murder and nonnegligent manslaughter data are useful for longitudinal studies and for computing female homicide rates. Also, information on age is easily obtained. A serious drawback of UCR homicide statistics is that data are not available on gender *and* race. To remedy this oversight, FBI supplementary homicide data tapes are accessible to researchers.

National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS)

Data from the NCHS are also referred to as vital statistics. Collected from death certificates, this information provides useful victimization data and circumstances of the homicide such as choice of weapon, victim demographics (for example, age, sex, race, weight), the number of wounds, and the time of death. A major disadvantage of NCHS data is that they are victim-based and yield little material on offenders.

Prison Studies

A great deal of detail concerning individual homicides can be garnered through the use of prison data, which rely on information from prison records and/or interviews of inmates. Nonetheless, Wilbanks (1982: 158) points to serious biases in this type of sample, "Obviously it is not representative of all offenders in a particular jurisdiction; those not caught, charged, convicted, or sentenced to prison are not included. Furthermore, a sample of offenders present in a particular time is likely to

overrepresent serious (long term) offenders, since those with shorter sentences are less likely to be "caught" at the time the sample is drawn."

Prison studies that rely on inmate interviews for details of murders have limitations similar to those for data gathered from the respondents in victimization surveys—forgetting, inaccurate or incomplete recall, lying, differential respondent productivity, and reliance on the skills and effects of the interviewers (Mann, 1993).

"Anecdotal" Studies

Instead of using sampling procedures, this type of data base relies on cases collected from various sources such as media accounts and offender autobiographies. Wilbanks is highly critical of data gleaned from such sources because "the cases reported are not representative of any group of offenders and may merely reflect the bias of the author" (*ibid.*).

City Studies

This type of jurisdictional research provided the data base used in the present study. City studies commonly rely on information from death certificates and/or police reports, thereby providing richer detail. The in-depth examination of police and homicide files, for example, provides a splendid source of information on the nuances of a homicide: time, place, weapon used, use of alcohol and narcotics by the offender and victim, the possible motive, the victim-offender relationship, prior arrests, previous violent offenses of the offender (and often the victim as well), the criminal justice processing of the offender, and the final case disposition. The disadvantages of using city data include the problems of generalizing to other jurisdictions and the serious obstacle of missing data.

A quick perusal of Table 1.1, which includes the identified studies of female criminal homicide offenders from 1958 to 1992 by data bases, demonstrates the preponderance of prison and city studies in such research. The table lists homicide studies of women offenders by the names of the researchers, the study years and year reported, the location of the study, the number of cases, the type of study (data base),⁹ the percentage of African Americans in the studies, the mean age of the offenders, the percentage found to have prior records, and the victim/offender relationship (family/intimate, acquaintance/friend, stranger, or unknown).

Beginning with Wolfgang's seminal study of homicide reported in 1958, a total of twenty-five empirical studies¹⁰ focusing on female homicide offenders are identified. Three of the studies describe national rates of and/or general trends in male and female homicide (Shin, Jedlicka, and Lee, 1977; Wilbanks, 1982; 1983a), whereas the remaining research efforts are city or prison studies. Among the cities included are Philadelphia, Baltimore, Detroit, St. Louis, Atlanta, Pittsburgh, Houston, Tusca-

Table 1.1

Selected Characteristics of Empirical Studies of Female Criminal Homicide Offenders, 1958-1992.

Researcher(s)	Year Reported	Location/ (Data base)	Study Period	Number of Cases	% African American	Mean Age	% Prior Record	Firearm Used	Victim/Offender Relationship			
									Family/ Intimate	Acq/ Friend	Stranger Unk	
1958-1967												
Wolfgang	1958	Philadelphia (Police)	1948-52	108	85.2	32.6	51.6	22.5	67.4	21.8	3.3	7.7
Rokorny	1965	Houston (Police)	1958-61	99	70.7	—	—	56.0	50.1	33.4	2.4	14.1
1968-1977												
Cole, Fisher, & Cole	1968	California (Prison)	1965	111	43.2	37.0	67.0	(W) 37.0 (AA) 31.0	67.0	—	33.0	—
Ward, Jackson, & Ward	1969	Minnesota (Prison)	1963-66; 1968	179	25.0 ¹	—	20.0	34.0	54.0 ¹	18.0	8.0	20.0
Suval & Brisson	1974	North Carolina (Prison)	1969-1971	87	80.5	30.0 ²	27.2	—	—	—	—	—
Rosenblatt & Greenwood	1974	Canada (Prison; Mental Hospital)	1970-71	24	—	35.0 ³	16.7	50.0	87.5	8.3	—	4.2
Raskó	1976	Hungary (Police; Court)	"WWII end to recent times,"	125	—	—	—	—	75.5	13.6	10.7	—
Gibbs, Silverman, & Vega	1977	Florida (Prison)	1977	43	60.5	33.0	—	78.7 ⁴	55.9 ⁴	24.4 ⁴	19.8 ⁴	—

Table 1.1 (Continued)

Researcher(s)	Year Reported	Location/ (Data base)	Study Period	Number of Cases	% African American	Mean Age	% Prior Record	Firearm Used	Victim/Offender Relationship			
									Family/ Intimate	Acq/ Friend	Stranger	Unk
1978-1987												
Totman	1978	California (Prison)	July-Dec., 1969	50	26.0	32.9*	77.8*	61.0	100.0	—	—	—
Biggers	1979	Florida (Prison)	2 years	32	—	35.0	—	—	78.0	—	12.5	9.4
McClain	1981	Detroit, St. Louis, Atlanta, Pittsburgh Houston, Los Angeles	1975	119	100.0 (selected)	32.8	—	72.6	—	—	—	—
Wilbanks	1983a	Dade County; Miami, FL (Police)	1980	47	59.6	—	—	59.2	70.2	19.2	8.5	2.1
	1983b	UCR (National)	1980	2412	—	—	—	57.5	59.6	27.9	6.5	6.1
Bunch, Foley, & Urbina	1983	Florida (Prison)	—	90	52.5	29.3	—	—	—	*Only 33.3% knew victims well.*		
Weisheit	1984	Illinois (Prison)	I 1940-66 II 1981; 1983	460	73.0	132.8 II 27.3	—	44.0	57.0	29.0	11.0	3.0
Kowalski, Shields & Wilson	1985	Alabama (Prison)	1929-71	455	87.7	33.0	45.6	38.6	63.8	29.2	7.1	—
Formby	1986	Tuscaloosa County, AL (Prison)	1970-79	14	64.0	40.0	—	57.0	64.0	29.0	7.0	—
Block	1986	Baltimore, MD (State's Atty.)	1974-84	258	89.5	30.9	—	40.5	—	—	—	—

loosa (Alabama), Chicago, New York City, and Los Angeles. Previous state female homicide studies were reported from California (2), Florida, (2), Illinois, Minnesota, New York, and North Carolina. Three studies from other countries are included for cross-cultural comparisons: two in Canada (Rosenblatt and Greenland, 1974; Silverman and Kennedy, 1987) and one in Hungary (Raskó, 1976).

Studies from 1958 to 1967

The first decade in our schematic is limited to the time-honored Marvin Wolfgang study.¹¹ Wolfgang (1958) established the city as “an ideal laboratory” for the analysis of homicide in his classic “question-driven” investigation of patterns of criminal homicide derived from 588 cases collected in Philadelphia from 1948 through 1952 (Cheatwood, 1991: 4). Although the data in the present study of female homicide offenders do not exactly replicate those from the Wolfgang study, there are many similarities, and the Wolfgang “model” and findings are cited extensively throughout this volume.

The Wolfgang Philadelphia study used police records to compile material on the “age, sex, race, as well as criminal histories of victims and offenders in homicide events; alcohol use of victims; the relationship of victim and offender using an eleven-part classification scheme; the relationship of other felonies to homicide, and patterns of weapon use” (Zahn, 1991: 17). These variables, as well as some additional ones, are included in the study reported here. Further, “two influential but controversial concepts that grew out of the research—victim precipitation and the subculture of violence” (Block and Block, 1991)—are important components in the conceptual development of the current study. In the first instance, the knotty problem of *victim precipitation* is especially germane to women homicide offenders because of the extraordinary reliance on self-defense as a justification for murder. Wolfgang (1958) created the term based on his finding of multiple instances of victims who instigated their own deaths through hostile movements, insults, insinuations, or physical actions against their eventual perpetrators:

The term *victim-precipitated* is applied to those criminal homicides in which the victim is a direct, positive precipitator in the crime. The role of the victim is characterized by his having been the first in the homicide drama to use physical force directed against his subsequent slayer. The victim-precipitated cases are those in which the victim was the first to show and use a deadly weapon, to strike a blow in an altercation—in short, the first to commence the interplay of resort to physical violence (Wolfgang, 1958: 252).

Wolfgang’s second abstraction—the *subculture of violence*—has garnered little empirical support (Hawkins, 1986). This theory, which is

applied almost exclusively to African Americans but also, more recently, to Hispanic Americans, suggests that value systems prescribing violence, including homicide, are peculiar to lower-class, urban areas and constitute an integral part of criminogenic conduct norms handed down through generations. The applicability of the subculture of violence perspective to African American females has received little research attention. An attempt to remedy that empirical oversight is made in this volume.

In a "partial replication" of Wolfgang's Philadelphia study, Pokorny (1965) reported on 438 homicide cases, 99 of which involved female offenders, which took place in Houston, Texas between March 15, 1958 and December 31, 1961. Pokorny found that there were many similarities between the two cities, "Criminal homicide occurs most often between members of the same race; that the persons involved tend to be relatives or friends rather than strangers; that males are more frequently involved, both as offenders and victims; and that the most likely hours are between 8:00 p.m. and 2:00 a.m. The persons involved typically live at the same address or within a mile or two of each other (*ibid.*, p. 487)."

Studies from 1968 to 1977

Empirical studies of female homicide offenders over the next ten years, including the Canadian study by Rosenblatt and Greenland (1974), focused almost exclusively on imprisoned women murderers (Cole, Fisher, and Cole, 1968; Ward, Jackson, and Ward, 1969; Suval and Brisson, 1974; Gibbs, Silverman, and Vega, 1977). These studies produced details on the victim, the murder, the motive for the murder, social and demographic characteristics of the offender, and the criminal histories of the incarcerated women.

Although the thrust of Raskó's (1976) research was the victims of female killers in Hungary, the use of police and court records for her data base enabled Raskó to extract information on the victim-offender relationship, the mode of attack, and the role of alcohol in the homicides.

Using national homicide rates from 1940 to 1974, Shin, Jedlicka, and Lee (1977) provide another research exception to the female prison studies of this decade. Shin et al. centered their examination on homicide among African Americans and included gender and age differences by race.

Studies from 1978 to 1987

While prison studies of women homicide offenders continued to be popular in the late 1970s and 1980s (Totman, 1978; Biggers, 1979; Bunch, Foley, and Urbina, 1983; Weisheit, 1984), a number of researchers used a city (Wilbanks, 1983a; Zimring, Mukherjee, and Van Winkle, 1983; Block, 1986; Formby, 1986; Goetting, 1987; Hewitt and Rivers,

1986)—or, more important, more than one city—for their data bases (McClain, 1981; 1982; Mann, 1988). The increasingly recognized national problem of drug abuse among women generated studies on the influence of drugs on female homicide commission (Abel and Zeidenberg, 1986).

During this decade, Wilbanks (1983b) reported national homicide rates among females in the United States. Across our northern border, Silverman and Kennedy (1987) used national data that focused on Canadian females who had committed manslaughter over a twenty-three-year period or infanticide over a ten-year period.

These were exciting times for researchers interested in female crime and delinquency, a topic that had been virtually ignored until the 1970s. Notably, Freda Adler's classic treatise on female criminality, *Sisters in Crime*, was published in 1975, and Jane Totman produced her fascinating monograph based on California prison case file reviews and interviews, *The Murderess: A Psychosocial Study of Criminal Homicide* (1978).

Those researchers who studied female homicide offenders in the 1980s began to speculate, some even to theorize, about the etiology of female violence. As researchers specialized in specific aspects of homicides by female offenders, several themes appeared. In the prison studies, where a variety of test data were available, the possible influence of offender characteristics such as *intelligence* was introduced. The *psychology* of women murderers was extrapolated from various psychological and personality instruments routinely administered in prisons. Level of education and other *social characteristics* such as employment status, marital status, and family background began to appear as items of interest relative to women who kill. A *sex-role perspective* was interjected as causative by some researchers (Bunch, Foley, and Urbina, 1983; Kowalski, Shields, and Wilson, 1985). *Race* also became an important variable of interest, particularly in light of the early Wolfgang (1958) findings of the disproportionate involvement of African Americans in homicide arrests and his "subculture of violence" thesis. Furthermore, in the mid-1980s it was determined that homicide was a leading cause of deaths among African Americans and constituted a public health crisis for African American males (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1986).

Studies from 1988 to the Present

Continued interest is demonstrated in the contemporary problem of female drug abuse, a phenomenon that has rapidly accelerated in the past five years, even more than among males (De Witt, 1990). The connection between drug use and homicide among women in New York City is an ongoing focus of Goldstein and his colleagues, who find a "shift away from the domestic arena and towards the drug business for female homicide

victims" because of women's increasing participation in the drug business (Arnold, Goldstein, Brownstein, and Ryan, 1988: 19). Barry Spunt (1992), a former research assistant of Goldstein, is currently testing several hypotheses concerning the drugs-homicide nexus with women inmates in the New York State system. This exciting research is in progress and the findings are eagerly awaited.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Selected demographics on the study cities—Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, and New York—are presented in chapter 2. Other homicide studies undertaken in those cities are reported with particular attention devoted to the findings on women killers. The second chapter also describes the sampling procedure, the final data base, and the methods of analysis used. A discussion of methodological quandaries that had to be overcome—for example, securing permission to make a field visit and obtaining access to police files, homicide records, FBI reports, and criminal court information—is included for the benefit of future field researchers. These experiences yielded procedural guidelines for possible replications of the original study. The chapter concludes with a brief description of the social and demographic characteristics of the study group.

While the remaining chapters describe the specific major findings of the study, in order to provide a comprehensive depiction of the phenomenon, reference is made throughout each chapter to relevant findings from the available pool of previous research shown in Table 1.1 as each topic is discussed.

Descriptions of the crime scene presented in chapter 3 include the location of the homicide (whether inside or outside the home), the specific site within a residence (for example, living room, kitchen), and whether the murder took place in the residence of the victim, in that of the offender, or elsewhere. Other ecological variables include the time, day of the week, and month each homicide occurred. The choice of weapon and the number of wounds inflicted on the victim are additional circumstances of the murder that are amplified by case examples. Chapter 3 also includes the role of the female murderer in the homicide (whether she committed it alone or with accomplices) and the contribution of narcotics and/or alcohol to her violent act. These data are disaggregated and cross-tabulated by year, city, and region according to selected relevant variables and buttressed with appropriate illustrations from individual cases.

The murder victims of the female homicide offenders are the focus of chapters 4 and 5, in which three distinct approaches are highlighted.

First, the murder is described in terms of the victim/offender relationship: child, spouse, parent, other female, friend, acquaintance, or stranger. Second, the victim's condition is examined to determine if s/he was under the influence of narcotics and/or alcohol prior to the murder, was incapacitated due to illness, a physical handicap, or age (either old or young), or was asleep when killed. The third analytic strategy focuses on whether and how key individuals—the victim, the offender, or bystanders—contributed to the homicide. A number of cases will be used to portray the victim-offender association and interaction. These data are also disaggregated and cross-tabulated by year, city, and region according to relevant variables.

More specifically, in chapter 4, the victims described are those with whom the offenders had intimate relationships, or who could be defined as "significant others." Detailed attention is devoted to *infanticide* and *filicide*, or those cases where mothers murdered their small children. The second focus of chapter 4 is on *domestic homicides* in which women killed the men and women whom they presumably loved. The majority of intimate victim cases involved domestic relationships, primarily men with whom the women homicide offenders were sexually intimate. Special attention is devoted to a seldom-reported phenomenon—the murders of lesbian lovers. Although there were only five such cases identified, the dynamics of the homosexual murders were found to parallel those involving male intimates as the victims. Throughout the chapter, relevant time and regional (south/nonsouth) analyses are included for comparisons between the years and the cities studied. A brief discussion of murders involving other family members as victims—for example, parents, siblings, cousins—closes the chapter.

Other homicide victims and murder circumstances are highlighted in chapter 5, which focuses on females who kill other females (*intragender* murder), the influence of *race/ethnicity* in female homicide offending, and the killing of *nonfamily members* (friends, acquaintances, or strangers). Particular attention is devoted to females who kill strangers, since one of the criteria used to define the alleged "new" female murderess as hardened and cold-blooded includes felony killing of strangers, killing for fun, or the thrill of killing.

Chapter 6 addresses the *criminal justice* data (prior arrests, history of victim, amount of bond, detention status) and processing of female homicide offenders from the initial charge to the final court disposition. Although none of the women received the death penalty, five were given life sentences. Women who received prison sentences are compared with those who did not, with a consideration of the possible influence of legal and extralegal factors and the length of prison sentences assigned.

Although a few researchers question whether women offenders are

accorded more leniency by the criminal justice system than men, a small number of studies indicate that even when women commit the same offenses, they are not treated as punitively as their male counterparts. However, there is some evidence that gender disparity is diminishing. When the murder of a spouse is involved, the notion of preferential judicial treatment for females is questionable—women who kill their mates are found to receive harsher sanctions than men who kill their mates. In general, the question of disparate treatment due to gender has yet to be resolved, particularly when the race of female defendants is introduced. The criminal justice data in chapter 6 are disaggregated and cross-tabulated by race and other relevant variables and supplemented by case descriptions.

The final chapter of this volume summarizes the research findings and creates a synoptic profile of the contemporary female criminal homicide offender. The motives of female murderers form the nucleus of chapter 7. Case studies are especially useful for depicting the motives for homicides as well as illustrating possible fallacies in the given motives. A consistent finding of “self-defense” as the motive for murder precipitates a discussion of the “battered woman syndrome,” a controversial abstraction frequently used as a rationale for self-defensive actions in female-perpetrated homicide cases. Self-defense and other motive data are compared by race, years, city, and region in chapter 7.

As in most exploratory research, several research questions were generated by the findings. In chapter 7, tentative answers are given to those questions identified earlier: economic theory as applied to women who kill, the “subculture of violence” perspective, the southern culture of violence, the “battered woman syndrome,” the possible influence of drugs on homicide, whether African American lives are devalued by the courts, and if race is a factor in the criminal justice processing of female criminal homicide offenders.

Additional research questions suggested for future explorations of women who kill are centered on: the contribution to trauma-induced deaths of limited access to prompt medical care; the role of poverty in female-headed households and homicide; the relationship of the women’s movement to homicide; the motive conundrum; physical size and weapon use in murder outcomes; international cross-cultural comparisons; the connection between homicides by females and other female offenses, for example, drug abuse, prostitution, and robbery; legal defense and judicial processing of female criminal homicide offenders; and differences between women who kill and receive prison terms and those sentenced to death.¹²

The book concludes with commentary related to the necessity of regarding the problem of violence as a human, not just a gender, issue.

The prevention of violence and the necessary policies and procedures to achieve that goal are also suggested.

NOTES

1. Severe assaults included acts with a higher probability of causing an injury: kicking, biting, punching, hitting with an object, beating up, threatening with a knife or gun, and using a knife or gun.

2. Chapter 4 details child murders committed by females.

3. I am indebted to the following people for their tremendous cooperation: Tricia Clark, State of California, Department of Justice, Bureau of Criminal Statistics and Special Services; Linda Booz, Florida Department of Law Enforcement, Division of Criminal Justice Information Systems; and Mark L. Cimring, State of New York, Division of Criminal Justice Services.

4. Only adult females are described in the statistics from these states.

5. Hereafter, *murder* is the term used when reference is made to UCR statistics.

6. It is reiterated that the rates of female arrests for aggravated assault in 1979 and 1983 are not much different from those today. In 1979 women accounted for 12.4 percent of all arrests for aggravated assault, and the offense ranked 11th among all female arrests at 2.1 percent. By 1983 the percentages were 13.5 percent and 2.1 percent respectively, with the ranking remaining at 11th. The 1992 figures show an increase to 14.8 percent of all arrests for aggravated assault and while the ranking is now 10th, arrests for this offense increased only modestly, to 2.4 percent of total female arrests.

7. The actual figures are: California, 325 homicide arrests out of a total of 274,068; Florida, 141 of 115,099; and New York State, 191 of 94,659.

8. Although an intergender comparison would have been optimal, the time and fiscal limitations of the study prevented the collection of data on male homicide offenders in the six-city study.

9. In recent years a flurry of books and articles have concentrated on abused or battered women who strike back, killing their abusers (for example, Browne, 1986; Johann and Osanka, 1989). This body of literature is not included because of the primarily anecdotal, clinical, or case study approach (Silverman and Kennedy, 1987). Following Wilbanks

(1982), cases such as these not only are particularistic but may also reflect the biases of the authors.

10. Some authors have published extensively from their data bases, and where relevant, information from these articles is reported. Table 1.1, however, is limited by references to a single article for each study.

11. The reader is enthusiastically referred to Volume XIV, no. 2 of the *Journal of Crime & Justice* (1991), which includes an invaluable special section on homicide research and the Wolfgang tradition.

12. Preliminary efforts are currently underway to initiate a study comparing female murderers who receive the death penalty and those who do not.