

ODVN's Fatality Reports: Sobering Insight into Intimate Partner Violence Trends in Ohio



We all agree we are seeing and feeling an escalation and expansion of violence.



Content warning: the following article deals with violence against adults and children.

An interview with Lisa DeGeeter, Director of Systems Advocacy and Policy Counsel - Ohio Domestic Violence Network and Maria York, Policy Director - Ohio Domestic Violence Network

The Big Ideas team was honored to sit down with Lisa DeGeeter and Maria York from the [Ohio Domestic Violence Network](#) (ODVN) for this week's Big Ideas blog. ODVN is a nonprofit that supports and strengthens Ohio's response to domestic violence through training, public awareness, and technical assistance and to promote social change through the implementation of public policy. These two professionals took a deep dive into the organization's annual [Fatality Reports](#), which use an ever-

evolving process to bring light to the realities around intimate partner relationship fatalities in our state.

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**CLA: Thank you both so much for taking some time to talk about this tough topic. To start, can you share a little about the history of the fatality reports and any trends you've noticed since inception?**

Maria: Definitely. We've been collecting this data for the last eight years. But it's so important for everyone to know there is a big asterisk here - a disclaimer - that our numbers are likely only the tip of the iceberg. Our process in collecting this information over the years has been evolving. We're learning a lot. Today, we collect data via a media aggregator keyed around terms like "murder-suicide" and "domestic violence homicide", we ask our local programs, and we search gun violence archives.

Lisa: As for trends, the short answer is - we're seeing an increase in fatalities. Of course, there are so many factors at play here and so many reasons we may not be collecting the full breadth of the data out there. Pre-pandemic, rates were up and down but all within a pretty small range for several years. We saw a big spike during the beginning of the pandemic, which was no surprise. People couldn't get out safely. We expected that high to go down, but it really hasn't. For 2022, we saw the same victim numbers as we did the year before. We're seeing more child victims and we're seeing more family annihilation.

**CLA: Tell us a little more about family annihilation. It's a heartbreaking term, and one that's probably new for some of our readers. What is this and what's going on here?**

Maria: Our known number of family annihilation cases doubled from 2021 to 2022 in Ohio. Family annihilation is when the perpetrator kills two or more family members, usually including partner, parents, or children. It's so hard to draw any generalizations because every family annihilation case is different. And our numbers, while doubled, are still small. These cases can be complicated and sometimes last over months. For example, in one case the perpetrator killed himself and his daughter during a parenting time visit. A few months later, his 19 year old son - who was distraught and had witnessed violence throughout his life - killed his brother, his mother (the original victim of intimate partner violence), and himself.

Lisa: I agree it's hard to know exactly what's going on here. What we do know is that our shelter partners are anecdotally reporting a notable increase in the severity of violence they are seeing. Victims are suffering from traumatic brain injury and histories of strangulation at higher rates. The numbers are overwhelming. The challenge is quantifying this. How do you gauge the severity of physical violence? Is being pushed twice worse than being hit once? But we all agree we are seeing and feeling an escalation and expansion of violence.

**CLA: Thank you. Can you tell us a little more about why ODVN collects this data? What do you do with it?**

Lisa: In the world of domestic violence advocacy, we've always known some victims pay the ultimate price. It's an important reality we face and it's a piece of why we do what we do. I think a major reason domestic violence advocates started talking about and collecting fatality data is because everyone else just doesn't know how severe DV can be. I used to wear a pin that said "four women a day" on lobby days, and legislators were astounded to learn this was the number of victims who die from DV every day. Horrified and astounded.

Maria: And the information is so useful for awareness elsewhere, like at church and community events. We need to all be aware of what's happening in our communities.

**CLA: What would you highlight for our readers about the most recent Fatality Report? What should we be taking away?**

Maria: Building on what Lisa mentioned earlier, the number of victims who died from traumatic brain injuries or strangulation was high. It doubled from last year. This has us concerned. Additionally, we're seeing people of color disproportionately represented in the victim numbers.

Lisa: I agree. We also took a deep dive into the numbers of victims who had prior contact with the justice system. We have so much anecdotal evidence showing a high percentage of victims were involved with the courts or law enforcement - with shelter partners telling us things like "she had just applied for a CPO" and "they were in the middle of a divorce" or "the CPO hearing was set for the next day". To be honest, this threw us. To know that the eyes of all these professionals were on these victims is concerning. People are talking to cops, judges, prosecutors, and still ending up murdered.

Some good news - if you can call anything about the report good news - is that all perpetrators in Ohio's 2022 fatalities were charged criminally. We've refined our collection methods to capture this as accurately as possible. There was also one fatality in which the domestic violence victim was being attacked, wrestled the knife away from her abuser, and ended up killing him. We were pleased to see she was not charged.

**CLA: This is such important data, and there are so many layers to collecting and presenting it. Tell us about any evolutions in your process in**

**recent years.**

Lisa: Our partners are so important in this process. We recently streamlined the way we collect data from them, and that has helped a lot. Local partners are getting just their sliver of existing data to review and augment. So this change has helped a lot. And every year we do this, our partners are learning along with us. We are all getting better at finding secondary victims, which provides an important piece of the big picture.

**CLA: And what are your future goals for the reports?**

Lisa: Any time we talk about numbers, we use the term “at least”. We know we miss so many victims for so many reasons. And we are always looking at ways to find them. In the future, we are hoping to look at death certificates. And we would like to compile and present longitudinal data to facilitate learning and policy changes. ODVN just added a new data analyst to start on this level of work.

**CLA: Talk to me a little more about the “at least” phenomenon here. Do we have any sense how many victims we are missing?**

Maria: We know we are missing a lot. It’s so tough, especially when you think about marginalized communities and underserved populations. Are these communities feeling safe to utilize services? When there are fatalities, do they receive the same level of media coverage? This past year, we found one case involving a same-sex couple fatality. There was even an officer-involved shooting. Zero media coverage. And these partners were married with a CPO in place.

**CLA: A big question for a tough topic. What can we all do (the legal community, social service partners, advocates, the public) to get these**

## **numbers down?**

Lisa: The short answer - take this seriously. Realize the level of risk. Get training in lethality assessments for a broad array of professionals so the appropriate responses are in place for escalated risk. Everybody needs to realize - victims tend to downplay risk. It's really different from stranger violence. So when a victim says they are afraid for their life, you listen. That's one of the best predictors violence will become lethal.

## **CLA: What's your call to action for our readers here?**

Lisa: Educate yourselves on this. Read our reports. Listen to victims. Believe them. Pay attention to legislation out there. At ODVN, we are watching several pieces of legislation that could impact the rights and safety of victims. House Bill 111 could create the presumption of jail time for many F-3 offenders who are otherwise going to be out on bond; Senate Bill 100 could make it easier to prove the pattern of stalking by criminalizing the installation of tracking devices; and House Bill 231 supports a permanent mental health crisis line that potentially defuse so many fatalities that involve suicidal ideation.

Maria: And take care of yourselves, especially those of you who help others. Our website has a great "[Support for Stressful Times](#)" section with many resources on self-care and secondary trauma.

This article is part of Legal Aid's "[Big Ideas](#)" series.

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**For more information on ODVN's Fatality Reports, contact Lisa at [lisad@odvn.org](mailto:lisad@odvn.org)**

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